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PC GAMER®

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LEGO UNIVERSE
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REVIEWED
ALPHA PROTOCOL
SPLIT/SECOND
THE SIMS 3: AMBITIONS

COVER TITLES ARE CLICKABLE!

WHY THIS KOALA HAS A SAW–*p.44*

9 FAMILY FRIENDLY MMOS
KIDS + FREE = FUN!

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OUR FASTEST PC EVER—WORTH IT? *p.91*

FIRST LOOK

DEUS EX
HUMAN REVOLUTION
The Greatest Game of All Time is Back

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NUMBER 203
AUG 2010
Future MEDIA WITH PASSION

PC GAMER

AUGUST 2010

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#203 AUGUST 2010

EDITORIAL
Editor-In-Chief Logan Decker
Senior Editor Evan Lahti
Reviews Editor Dan Stapleton
Associate Editor Josh Augustine
Intern Erik Belsaas
Contributors Richard Cobbett, Chris Comiskey, Desslock, Tim Edwards, Tom Francis, Leon Hurley, Andy Mahood, Rich McCormick, Nathan Meunier, David Murphy, Craig Pearson, Graham Smith, Rob Smith, Mikail Yazbeck
Producer Debra Guilfoyle
Edit Squirrel Anchovy —

ART
Lead Designer Dan Fitzpatrick
Contributing Designer Christin Chi
Photographers Mark Madeo, Samantha Berg

BUSINESS
Publisher Kristen Salvatore
ksalvatore@futureus.com
Vice President, Games Kelley Corten
kcorten@futureus.com
Vice President, Sales and Marketing Rachelle Considine
rconsidine@futureus.com
Executive Director Integrated Sales Nathan Hunt
415-269-5408, nhunt@futureus.com
National Sales Manager Isaac Ugay
714-381-3419, iugay@futureus.com
Regional Sales Director Carol Gillard
646-723-5476, cgillard@futureus.com
Regional Sales Manager Arthur St. Germain
650-238-2571, astgermain@futureus.com
Detroit Consumer Manager Alan Dickinson
248-792-2408, alandmedia@comcast.net
Senior Marketing Manager Andrea Recio-Ang
650-238-2548, arecio-ang@futureus.com
Marketing Coordinator Allyson Kardel
akardel@futureus.com
Advertising Coordinator Jose Urrutia
jurrutia@futureus.com

PRODUCTION
Production Director Michael Hollister
Production Coordinator Dan Mallory
Print Order Coordinator Linh Chau-Ward

CONSUMER MARKETING
Vice President, Consumer Marketing Rich McCarthy
Circulation Director Stephanie Blake
Newsstand Director Bill Shewey
Consumer Marketing Operations Director Lisa Radler
Renewal And Billing Manager Mike Hill
Online Marketing Director Adam Whinston
Customer Service Manager Mike Frassica

FUTURE US, INC.
4000 Shoreline Court, Suite 400
South San Francisco, CA 94080
www.futureus.com
Tel 650-872-1642
Fax 650-872-2207

President John Marcom
Vice President/CFO John Sutton
Human Resources Director Nancy Durlester DuBois

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Future Plc
30 Monmouth St., Bath, Avon,
Ba1 2bw, England
www.futureplc.com
Tel +44 (0) 1225 442244 (Bath)
Tel +44 (0) 7042 4000 (London)

Chief Executive Stevie Spring
Non-executive Chairman Roger Parry
Group Finance Director John Bowman

Are you Ex-perienced?

If you haven't played the original *Deus Ex* yet, play it now. No matter how blown away you may be by the revelations in our cover story on *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, without the context of the original (which we named The Best Game of All Time in our February issue), you'll be missing out on the full dimension of what Eidos Montreal is achieving if you don't know the game it's trying to live up to.

This isn't a sequel to the ill-advised *Deus Ex 2: Invisible War*. Instead, it's a return to what burned the first game into the collective PC gaming memory: adventure that elevated videogames by giving you unprecedented freedom to create and execute your own strategies.

A quick note about a change to our Editors' Choice policy: In the past, we've automatically slapped our Editors' Choice award on any game scoring 90% or above. That's still true, but games that score 80% or more are now eligible to receive the Editors' Choice award at our discretion. The change came about because we want to ensure that really fantastic games we truly enjoyed are recognized as Editors' Choice material, even when a significant flaw or two drops the game below the 90th percentile. This will keep scores reasonable, give more games the props they deserve and ultimately lead to less editor-on-editor violence.

LOGAN DECKER
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
logan@pcgamer.com

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WHODUNIT

Evan Lahti
Senior Editor
Evan eagerly re-ups for another tour of duty in *ArmA 2: Operation Arrowhead*. Read the review on page 72.

Dan Stapleton
Reviews Editor
Dan is now one of the few people to have played a full third of *StarCraft II*'s campaign. Read the preview on page 40.

Dan Fitzpatrick
Lead Designer
Creating the *Fallen Earth* PvP story on page 22 nearly drove Dan mad, but he now knows how to survive the apocalypse.

Josh Augustine
Contributing Editor
Won't someone *please* think of the children? Josh did, and tested nine MMOs for family friendliness on page 24.

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BACK CHATTER

- I just downloaded *Serious Sam HD: The First Encounter*. I have to say, after spending the last couple of years playing FPSs that keep me worried about leveling up, new abilities, modified equipment and quests, it's nice to just be handed some guns and pointed towards some monsters. ***Nick Stackhouse***

- I was sitting around today, reading an older issue of your magazine and a thought struck me—you guys must love what you do! ***KC***

- I find it hard to believe you failed to mention the mod to rule all mods in issue 200: *Threewave CTF* for *Quake*. It's because of *Threewave* that capture the flag became a dietary staple of every single multiplayer FPS since. It also made the grappling hook mod famous. ***Tom Hatfield***

- I love how streamlined the new Steam UI looks. Really smooth and slick. Reminds me of the Zune software. ***Seth Fisher***

- Thank you so much for introducing me to *League of Legends!* I love how free games can be so entertaining. And it got me off of constantly playing *Call of Duty 4*, *Modern Warfare 2*, and *BF: Bad Company 2*. ***Nathaniel Onyschuk***

A is the new S

Like Craig (Letters, June 2010), I wonder why gamers subject themselves to such a restrictive setup as WASD. Since *Quake* I've remapped to EDAF for ease of use and flexibility. The EDAF setup is the natural position for your left hand on a keyboard. You also have more freedom to use your ring finger for other binds with W and S, all while strafing left at the same time. Try it. ***Jeremy Howard***

A thinking man's shooter

I recently turned 39 and have noticed a decline in my response time when playing first-person shooters. These damn 12-year-olds are quicker to the draw than I am, and there's nothing I can do about it. Are there any online shooters that'd let me use my experience and superior thought-processing power to pwn the younger guys? ***Aging Rod***

For the less twitchy among us, we recommend* Team Fortress 2*'s Medic and Engineer classes, both of which rely more on preparation and smart decision-making than fast reflexes, and* Battlefield 2*'s Commander, who provides support and strategy to teammates through a top-down map of the battlefield. PCG

There's potential for dramatic stop-motion fanfic with these.

Idle hands

I made a few custom *Mass Effect* figures for fun after being laid off: Shepard, Garrus, Grunt, Legion, a Geth Stalker and a Geth Juggernaut (plus a few old friends). I haven't bought the second game yet, so I hope most of these designs are accurate (they're based on pre-release images). ***Alex Uhr***

Tunnel vision

I have several friends that used to be hardcore PC gamers until *WoW* came out, but they haven't bought another game since. My problem is that I know so many people that won't try anything new simply because they feel that if they are paying a monthly fee for a game, that it means they must devote all of their time to that one game. What happened to gaming diversity? ***Zachtos***

Hard drive hog

Long ago when you reviewed *The Force Unleashed* (January 2010), I think you left out one critical detail in your otherwise perfectly justified review: It takes up 28GB on my hard drive! I've never seen such a huge game, and frankly I don't know why it takes up that much. I think the previous record holder was *FEAR 2* at 12GB. Know of any other hefty hard drive games worth noting? ***Brent Hannify***

As far as our collective memory goes,* The Force Unleashed *is second only to* Age of Conan*'s mighty 32GB install when it comes to sucking up space on your drive. A few other notable large installs include* Dragon Age: Origins *at 20GB,* Grand Theft Auto IV *at 16GB,* Mass Effect 2 *at 15GB and* MS Flight Sim X *at 14GB.

THE HOT MAIL

None too soon

I have read your magazine for about five years now, and generally got the vibe from you guys that you wouldn't review a game until its official release date. But with *Allods Online*, I find that you've suddenly decided to rate and review games that are fully listed as being in open beta. I find it saddening that you'd blast an excellently made game before it has even officially launched. The author of the "review" really dropped the ball. I hope this isn't too harsh, but this game deserves a real review. ***Matt Nelson***

Casting fan-rage lightning!

Our review policy is to review a game when the publisher tells us it's ready, or when it goes on sale. In the case of* Allods Online*, the game experienced a lengthy "open beta" period during which a cash shop happily accepted your hard-earned dollars—"beta" in name only. The line between "open beta" and "release" for a free-to-play game is fuzzy at best, and as soon as a game is freely available and ready to start taking your money, it's ready for us to review it. PCG

Fortunately, HD space is incredibly cheap these days—$80 buys you 1TB, enough room to install* TFU *36 times! PCG

Top secret

First off let me say that I love your magazine and the new look is great! There is one thing however I did not see that I look forward to every month: The Spy. I hope you are planning to keep him around, and that we will be reading the tales of his exploits in the upcoming issues. I really enjoy the reports of his adventures and the information he uncovers. ***Donald Causey***

You're in luck! We may have lost contact with The Spy for a short while, but he had a good excuse! He was deep undercover collecting the intel for this month's full-page report (see page 16). Expect more expanded details from the slickest master of espionage since Sam Fisher. PCG

Tall order

All 200 issues of *PC Gamer* stacked on top of each other creates a mound exactly 46.75 inches high. Just thought you'd like to know! Thanks for reminding me that I'm old. ***Joe Prokop***

For your valiant and undying dedication to stacking magazines in the corner of your room, Coconut Monkey hereby dubs thee "Joe the Archivist." May you bravely stack for many years to come. PCG

Download 'til it hurts

If I were to purchase a game by download and then have to wipe out my hard drive at some point, would I have to pay to download the game again? Is there some kind of protection for this situation? ***Larry Standel***

This is definitely something you should be aware of before you purchase anything online. The major download services (GoG.com, Steam, Impulse, Direct2Drive) will all allow you to re-download any game you purchased from them as often as you like. Some, like Steam, even allow you to back up your downloaded games to spare yourself the download time when you want to reinstall. In some cases it's a lot easier to re-install games purchased from digital retailers than searching for old game discs in your closet. But beware of GameStop's and EA's download stores, which have limits on how often you can re-download. PCG

The *PC Gamer* Tower of Babel has begun.

Double take

I couldn't help but notice the uncanny albeit creepy similarity between Logan and the screen shot of *Star Trek Online*'s Commander Sulu on page 89 of the May 2010 issue. Sulu is much oilier and geekier looking, but I still did a double take. ***Jeanette French***

Pictured left to right: Logan, Logan, Logan.

Has anyone else noticed Logan's resemblance to WWE wrestler Batista? Are you sure he doesn't have a superpower or something? ***Jason***

We're not sure we see the resemblance, but Logan can communicate with squirrels, which is basically a superpower.

He's still a fish

I must protest your slanderous portrayal of Admiral Ackbar in your May issue *Starcraft II* article. Ackbar is a brilliant tactician who was not prone to "wander[ing] gill-long into the fog of war." He couldn't have anticipated the Endor space battle trap—the entire thing had been orchestrated by the Emperor, the freaking Dark Lord of the Sith, to trap the Rebels. And besides, I seem to recall the Rebellion winning anyway. ***Marissa Wilk***

PRTSCN

So close...so very, very close.

I like to collect screenshots of *TF2* medics (usually me) who die from fire just inches from health packs. Here's my favorite. **Liam Arbetman**

SHOW US YOURS Take a great screenshot lately? Send it to us at letters@pcgamer.com with PRTSCN in the subject line and a description of what's going on in the body, and we might feature it in next month's issue.

BACK CHATTER

- Personally I'd prefer that any game with activation get an automatic 0%, but still, it's doing us all a service that you list the DRM status of games in reviews and the like. ***Andrew***

- Upon realizing that you guys are the only publication that had the guts to say how harmful Ubisoft's DRM is to legit PC gamers everywhere, I grabbed the March issue of *PC Gamer* and ordered one-year subscription. You have a damn fine magazine. Please keep up the good work. ***Dan Lee***

- The *X-COM*-inspired indie game *Xenonauts* may just be a worthy successor to the original as long as they keep the turn-based element and world and base development as well. ***Chris***

- *PC Gamer* made me into who I am today: a badass *Peggle* player! ***Joe Davault*** *Your badass Peggle skills bring honor to us all. Ricochet on, friend.* ***PCG***

WHERE WE PLAY

Play on the official *PC Gamer* community servers

Battlefield: Bad Company 2
8.17.251.133 (search "PC Gamer" in the server browser filter)

Counter-Strike: Source
207.210.252.63

ArmA 2
75.102.38.106

Garry's Mod
8.17.251.201

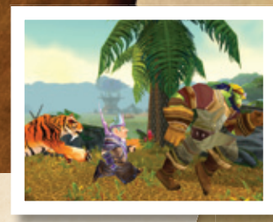
Our game servers are provided by Art of War Central, *PCG*'s staff-approved hosting service. Visit **artofwarcentral.com**

MONITOR

THE PC GAMER VIEW OF THE WORLD

Azeroth is a big place. But exactly how big is the world in *World of Warcraft*? No encyclopedia held the answer, so we decided to send out our own team of intrepid explorers, Lumis and Spark, to map every inch of Azeroth and uncover the mystery. Here are a few excerpts from Lumis' travel journal.

Day 1
Spark say we walk across all of Azeroth so he can make map of whole world. I'm not sure why he want this, but he say it will be big adventure for us. Maybe it even be fun!



Day 13
Definitely not so fun now. More tired. After desert, where I carry Spark cuz feet get hot easy, we go to jungles, where da tigers chase us and stuf, but we half done now, maybe!

Lumis & Spark: Azeroth's Cartographers

Azeroth is smaller than:

Rhode Island
Luxembourg
Hawai'i
Nashville, TN
Pluto (The ex-planet, not the cartoon dog)

Kalimdor
210
square miles

Northrend
65
square miles

Azeroth Total
487
square miles

Outland
43
square miles

Eastern Kingdoms
160
square miles

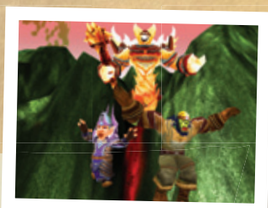
Manhattan, shown in scale with Azeroth

Azeroth is bigger than:

The City of Los Angeles
New York City
Guam
Hong Kong
Panau (Just Cause 2)
A bread box

Day 29
We leave desert and find ice and get real cold, but then we make fire with penguins. They were nice and give us fish. Spark say we almost have map of world!

Day 30
Spark say his fireball only go 35 yards, so if I stand real still dat far away I help measure distance. Spark use da maths he learned in wizard skool to figure out how big Azeroth is. Sounds hard. He also say my eyebrows grow back soon and dat real orcs don't cry.



Day 32
After so much math my head hurt, Spark say we know how much land in Azeroth. Spark try to claim only for Alliance, but I sneak copy to Thrall cuz he's nice. Apparently this big success cuz Spark buy me and all tavern big drinks!

Torchlight's vibrant art didn't come at the expense of high system requirements.

500,000 torches

Runic's founders on *Torchlight*'s big sales

In just eight months since launching on October 27, 2009, the charming, independently-developed action RPG *Torchlight* has moved a huge half-million copies. We talked to Runic Games' founders Max and Erich Schaefer to get their reaction to *Torchlight*'s success.

Brothers Max (top) and Erich Schaefer co-founded Runic with Travis Baldree and Peter Hu.

Are you surprised by how well *Torchlight* was received?
Erich Schaefer: We were definitely pleased, and the community reaction means more to us than sales numbers. I knew the game was fun well before we released it, but I couldn't predict the ultimate reaction.

How many copies did you expect to sell when you launched?
Max Schaefer: Since we were selling *Torchlight* solely as a digital download for the first few months, we really had no idea what to expect.
ES: We predicted 80,000 to 200,000 by the end of 2009, and we comfortably beat our high-end estimate. I think we were most surprised about how well it's continued to sell since then. On the other hand, from the start, just based on the idea and our team, I brashly predicted we'd sell a million, which I think is still pretty doable in the long run.

Have you learned any lessons from this success?
ES: I think the most relevant lesson was just confirming that our plans were solid; keeping the game light, easy and low-tech. Even though we have grand plans for the future, we'll keep aiming for approachability and a low system spec.

What does the success of *Torchlight* tell you about the state of the market for independently developed PC games?
MS: *Torchlight* proved that an independent developer can make and distribute a title, and find success without crazy budgets. We kept our budget down by making wise choices, like using an open source rendering engine, and a game design stripped of unnecessary additions. We also felt like there was an opportunity at the $20 price point, emphasizing digital distribution, and I think both of those choices were good ones, too.

BUNGIE JOINS ACTIVISION

BUSINESS! HALO DEVELOPERS GO MULTI-PLATFORM

Bungie has untangled itself from the uncomfortably close bear-hug of Microsoft to join up with mega-publisher Activision for a 10-year deal. Bungie's specialty in first-person shooters plugs the hole that the slow collapse of Infinity Ward leaves in Activision's lineup. They've announced that the brand-new action game franchise will land on all platforms, so we feel confident about the games looking mega-sharp at the PC's high resolutions.

TO INFINITY AND BELOW

TECH INDIE SPACE MMO RELEASES PLANET EXPLORATION VIDEO

The long-anticipated, one-man MMO project *Infinity* has released a video detailing the engine's ability to scale between space and ground level. The video shows off an intricate cockpit interior as the ship navigates the rings of a blue-green planet. Then the ship drops through the atmosphere and an expanse of icy alpine ridges, and glaciers seamlessly rise to fill the screen. Watch it at infinity-universe.com.

NOW PLAYING

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- **Alpha Protocol**
- **Blur**
- **Mass Effect 2**

StarCraft II editor reveals its power

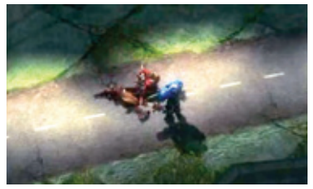
Game-changing mods already in production

The *StarCraft II* beta's Galaxy Editor gives those lucky enough to be in the pre-release test game a chance to knock together their own levels, via a comfortably simple interface. A few clicks will assemble a map in mere minutes, with the addition of cliffs, water and textures just a step above using MS Paint. But since its release, the remarkably detailed editor has also shown just how far into *StarCraft II*'s innards ambitious coders can reach, reworking the game entirely from RTS and converting it to an arcade classic, space shooter or survival horror. Here are six of the best mods so far, as found on community supersite sc2mapster.com. ■

Rich McCormick

Zergger bit.ly/b4Vcs3
Frogger as played by a Zergling. Players have to dodge streams of Siege Tanks, Ultralisks and other units from the main game to cross the space-street. There's a multiplayer mode, too, letting you play in the traffic with a friend.

Top-Down Fighters bit.ly/aihyAM
Shooting fun as viewed from above. The interface has been tweaked heavily, with WASD controlling your marine's movement, mouse-click firing missiles at Zerg, and grenades and stimpacks as collectable bonus items.



Resident Overmind bit.ly/9UecFV
Bearing the fixed camera angles, prettified lighting and murk-hiding creatures of a *Resident Evil* game, *Overmind* is survival horror done in *StarCraft II*. Pressing F on various objects will yield *Resi*-style snippets of exposition.

Space Shooter Sim 3D bit.ly/a9zjTq
Busting *StarCraft II*'s near-2D plane wide open, this impressive mod lets you pilot spacecraft in 3D environments, firing laser cannons. Still in an experimental state, there's not much to do yet beyond marvel at the editor's power.

Supply Depot Tetris bit.ly/chtrrV
Supply depots make up the *Tetris* blocks (Tetricubes? Tetrissangles?) on a 10-square board. The next shape and your score are in the correct corners, and the little depots are fully animated, whirring away as they drop into place.

Mar Sara Outlaws bit.ly/cXVghX
You play as a sheriff chasing a train robber across the wastes of Mar Sara. It's third-person, with a WASD and mouse aiming-system, boss battles and little cutscenes. Rifles and grenades handle Zerg and the robber himself.

THE SPY

The Spy is filmed before a live studio audience.

One upside of The Spy's many visits to Valve's HQ is the voluminous number of bugs he's managed to plant around CEO Gabe Newell's office. The Spy got a little over-enthusiastic and now Gabe has a chandelier made entirely of microphones dangling from his ceiling—a ceiling that is one gigantic sound-sensing acoustic tile.

The first vital info the Bugdalier recorded was that Valve isn't just working on *Portal 2*. The Seattle developer has hired a modder known as "IceFrog" to work on a variation of *Defence of the Ancients*, the *Warcraft III* scenario he's famous for. This isn't the usual Valve fare: *DotA* is a strategy game in which your base's turrets protect from creeping enemies while you level up your hero unit, RPG-style, and lead the charge into the enemy base. It's huge on the competitive gaming scene, and a massive draw in Asia—a market that Valve would, no doubt, be pleased to make inroads into.

Given that turrets are a recurring feature of Valve's design philosophy (the Engineer in *Team Fortress 2*, the Combine tech of *Half-Life 2*), it's not inconceivable that they're making a *DotA* game within a traditional FPS, perhaps even within an established Valve universe (just as *Portal* is set within the *Half-Life* universe). But then, IceFrog is not known for making FPS games. However it pans out, The Spy's mic picked up Gabe telling the team to prepare to show something off "soon," before a whine of feedback made him suspicious and he installed a Cone of Silence. Quick on his feet, The Spy swapped it for a bug shaped like a Cone of Silence and the espionage continued.

Got bug

The Spy's patented, bug-shaped phone (why bug a phone when you can make a phone that's a bug?) picked up some interesting gossip from Steam's partners. Electronic Arts' weekly call to Valve (to ask how many barrels of money they would be taking delivery of) made mention of a new game called *Darkspore*. There's definitely more mileage in EA's oddball, evolutionary strategy game *Spore* (and there's a *Spore* game scheduled for next year), but a *Spore* sequel would more likely be called *Spore: Something*. Are we looking at an entirely new IP from EA? Sadly, when Valve was testing the next *TF2* Engineer unlocks (they actually build the weapons to ensure they're super-accurate in game), the phone was crushed under a pile of rubble. So long, Bug-o-mo-phone. You served The Spy well.

Gabe's Cone of Silence bug still works perfectly, however. A memo from Ubisoft passed his desk, and Gabe's habit of enunciating every word when reading meant the Cone picked up a few mumbles of Ubi's plans. We already know about the new *Assassin's Creed* game, named *Brotherhood*, coming out at the end of this year. It'll star Ezio, the main man in *Assassin's Creed 2*. It'll also have multiplayer and character customization. Ubisoft is also working on two more Tom Clancy-branded games, not including the reworking of *Ghost Recon*, which is due out this year.

> "The new *Assassin's Creed* game comes out later this year."

It probably won't be *Splinter Cell*, given how long it takes Ubisoft to create and polish Sam Fisher's exploits. But it has been a while since The Spy heard about *Rainbow Six* in any form. There's also *HAWX* and *EndWar* to consider.

MMOmentary lapse

A communiqué from MMO specialist Cryptic landed on Gabe's desk, but he disastrously decided to take a stroll through the Valve offices while reading it. The Spy's network of bugs failed to grasp the entire gist as Gabe relayed it to members of Valve's staff, enquiring if this sort of thing was interesting. All The Spy can tell you is that Cryptic is making another MMO, due to be announced this summer. It could be set in the *Neverwinter Nights* universe, but The Spy is also aware that Cryptic has a huge interest in dinosaurs and giant lizards.

There was a bad moment while The Spy was listening in for *Episode 3* news (not a peep), and he heard Gabe finalizing the details of Valve's office move. The Spy suddenly had to consider bugging the place all over again from scratch. Thankfully, at the end, Gabe was heard to say, "Oh yes, and don't forget the chandelier and my Cone of Silence."

The Spy is listening, Gabe. Spy out. ■

Massive Attack

Nice horns. Shame about the face.

World of Warcraft Cataclysm

A lot more is changing than you expected.

The weirdest part of watching Blizzard reinvent *World of Warcraft*? Just how deep and how bold some of the design decisions its making are. Blizzard isn't not just providing new quests, new landscapes and new dungeons for their 11 million players, it's radically redesigning how its game works—from the classes that players have felt comfortable in for years, to the structure of the endgame. The array of tweaks and changes is dizzying.

Druids are losing their everlasting tree form. Rogues are being stripped of stunlocks. Paladins' shield durations are being significantly reduced. Death Knights are seeing a serious alteration in the way their runes (the resources they need to use abilities) generate. And all classes are expected to have smaller mana pools.

The changes are controversial, but when viewed dispassionately, make a certain sense. Druids spend so long shapeshifted that players rarely get to see the cool armor sets they've earned. Stunlocks are extremely frustrating for the victim and repetitive for the Rogue. The current rune system makes it too easy for Death Knights to lose resources, due to tiny bits of lag. And

Here's the second bombshell: the amount of dungeon currency you'll earn is capped.

anyone who's ever dueled a Paladin understands just how ludicrous it is to face a player who can shield himself from all damage for such long stretches of time.

This is Blizzard's strength; it's been playing, watching and tweaking this game for over a decade. They understand what's working, and what's not. And they're not afraid to make tough calls, even if they're certain to upset the playerbase.

The toughest call of all? It's the limit on raiding that Blizzard will enforce come *Cataclysm*. Right now, *World of Warcraft* raid teams can occupy themselves all night, every night and then some, if they want to. They can raid 10-man and 25-man versions of every top-tier instance, each of which drops different, insanely powerful loot. There are nine level-80 raids, meaning there are 18 total raids players can (and are sometimes expected to) run each week.

Thankfully, that's going to change. Now, 10- and 25-man dungeons will each drop the same armor and weapons, although 25-mans will drop appropriately more each run. And each boss kill will reward the same level of hero and valor points—the new currencies that you'll spend on loot in *Cataclysm*.

Social life saver

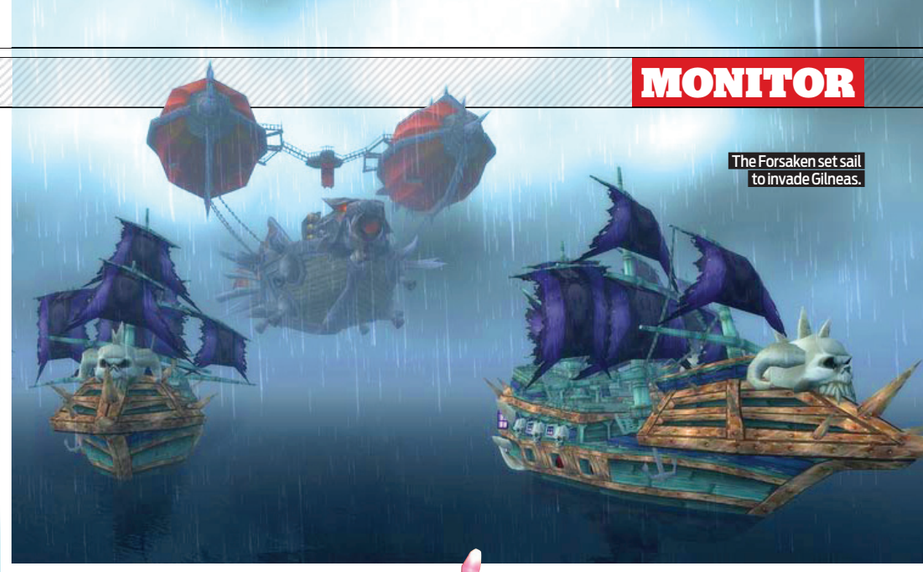
Here's the second bombshell: the amount of dungeon currency you can earn is capped. Hero points are earned from low-difficulty bosses, the equivalent of today's triumph emblems. You earn them very quickly, but you won't be able to hoard them—there's a cap to how many points you can hold at one time. Valor points are the equivalent of today's frost emblems; they're earned for high-difficulty boss kills (the latest raid tier), and for daily heroics. But there's a limit to how many you can hold *and* how much you can earn per week.

These are fantastic changes. We'll finally be able to choose the size of our raid based on what we *want* to play, not what gives us better loot. Secondly, there's no longer that nagging feeling of obligation to run twenty million raids each week to earn the maximum number of badges—simply pick the ones you like best and run those. You can choose to earn your loot at your own pace, in your own way; and as freedom-lovin' Americans, we fully support that.

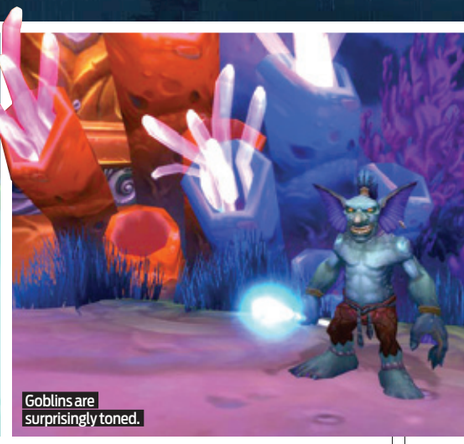
The community response to these changes has been fascinating. The usual anger and rage that we'd expect has been surprisingly absent, replaced by warmth and excitement. Warmth, because the limits on raiding mean that *World of Warcraft* can be a hobby, rather than a lifestyle choice. And excitement, because we have no idea what Blizzard is going to change next. ■

Tim Edwards

And those are just the roots of the world tree!


The Forsaken set sail to invade Gilneas.

Underwater dungeons offer a fun change of pace.


Goblins are surprisingly toned.

The undead still infest Tirisfal Glades.

Blood Sports

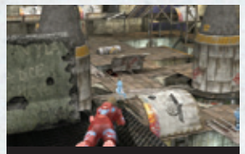
The architects of *Fallen Earth* share their secrets to victory in the most gruesomely competitive combat MMOs have ever seen!

Making shooter mechanics jibe with a true open-world MMO is no small feat, but *Fallen Earth* has done a darn good job of making it work. Now they're taking it to the next level with the introduction of Blood Sports—session-based competitive arenas where players can jump in and duke it out in PvP. We trained in the two new arenas with a couple of their creators, Lead Environmental Artist Cory Farris and Lead Scripter Michael Broadwater, to learn tips and tricks directly from the masters for players looking to get a leg up in these bloodbaths.

Blood Sports fashion: designed *by* bloodthirsty mercenaries *for* bloodthirsty mercenaries.

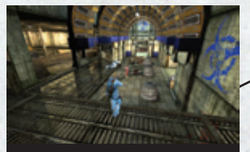
Capture the Flag

The stakes are high in this gritty run-down warehouse where players risk their lives to steal a piece of cloth on a pole.

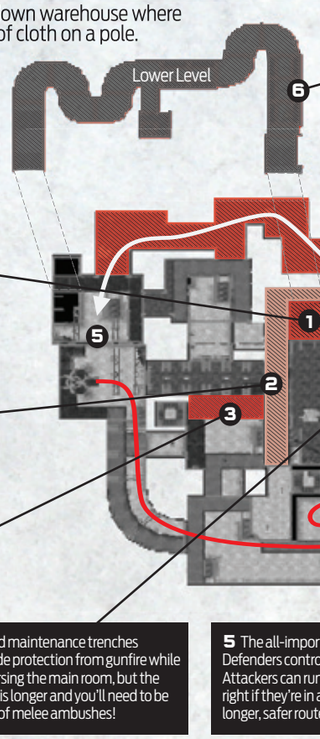


1 Snipers should head for this multi-level platform. The top level has a view of the and the lower level is perfect for defending the main entrance to the flag room.

2 When snipers control the middle, use secondary platforms that run the length of the main room. Their cover points counter the sniper nests so you can harass the other team safely.

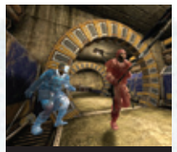


3 Each flag room has a platform that overlooks the main hall entrance, from which you can rain fire down upon anyone foolish enough to enter through the front door.

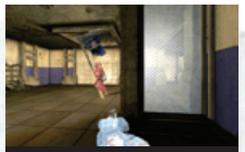


4 Old maintenance trenches provide protection from gunfire while traversing the main room, but the route is longer and you'll need to be wary of melee ambushes!

5 The all-important flag room. Defenders control the high ground. Attackers can run up the ramp on the right if they're in a hurry or take the longer, safer route along the left.



6 Sneaky players will use the underground service tunnels to avoid a messy frontal assault on the flag room.



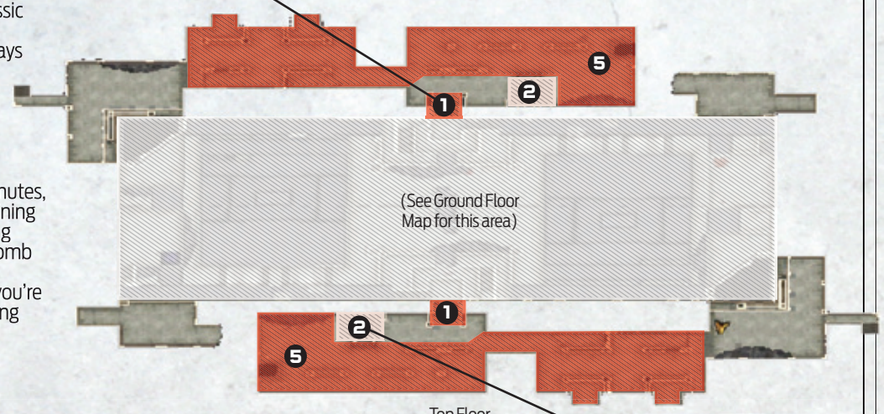
7 If you take the high road, watch out for one-way mirrors. Defenders can wait safely in these alcoves while keeping a watch for would-be flag thieves coming down the hall.

Deathmatch/Survival

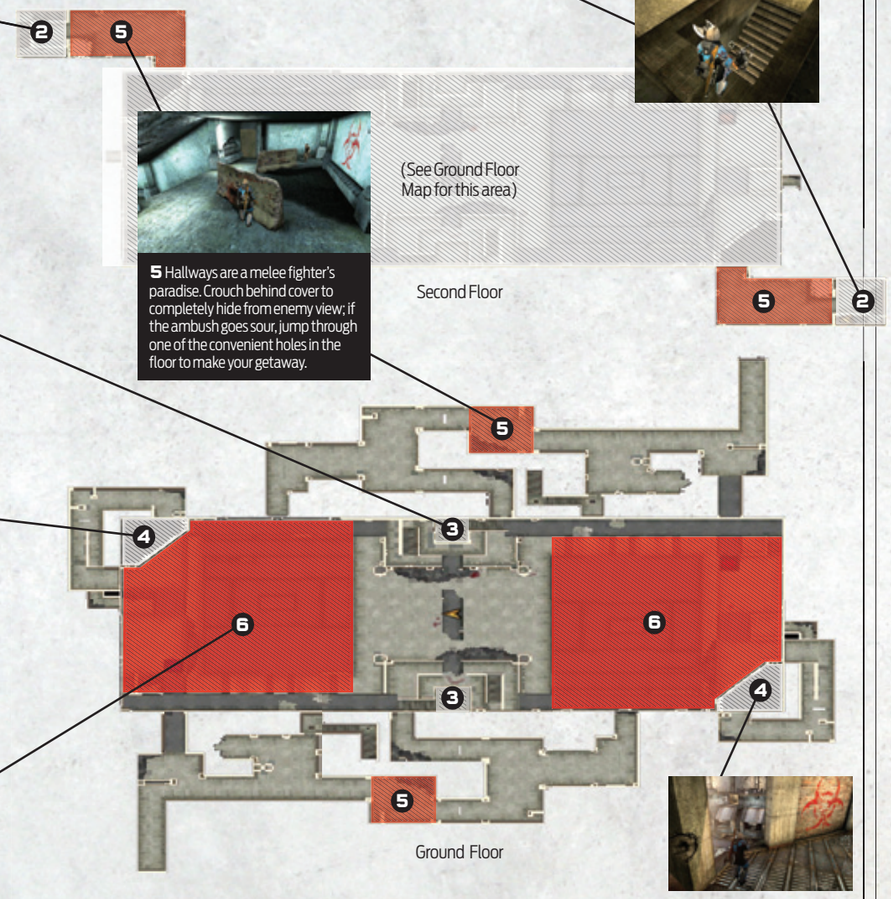
There's nothing quite like a classic frag-or-be-fragged free-for-all deathmatch. Survival mode plays on the same map, but adjusts the scoring system so kills are only worth half the points a death takes away from you.

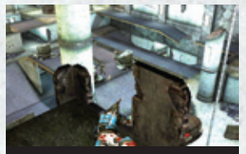
Everyone starts with a heap of points, and at the end of 10 minutes, the player with the most remaining points wins. Most of the fighting revolves around the gigantic bomb in the middle of the map that instantly kills everyone else, if you're able to detonate it without being interrupted.

1 Tower snipers giving you trouble? Sneak up through the broken walls behind them on the third floor and give them a taste of their own medicine.



2 The upper levels have some of the best ambush spots. Try lurking around the tops of staircases to pounce on unsuspecting players running up. Death from above!

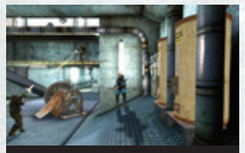




3 The towers are four-story pillars of ranged-weapon awesomeness. Perched here, you'll be able to attack a wide area of the main room, but the support structures below give some safety to other players. You'll need to constantly watch your back to avoid a quick death.

5 Hallways are a melee fighter's paradise. Crouch behind cover to completely hide from enemy view; if the ambush goes sour, jump through one of the convenient holes in the floor to make your getaway.

4 The corner balconies are ideal for firing at opponents who are holed up in the main tower or taking pot shots at unwitting players below you. Watch out, though! The mesh grating beneath you gives away your position, and your rear is exposed.



6 The main room has several types of cover available, which can be used as ambush spots or to provide cover from ranged enemies—rest assured, gunners will have their eyes peeled for any players not protecting themselves with bullet-stopping walls and barriers.

Family-Friendly MMOs, Ahoy!

PC Gamer's guide to sharing your love of MMOs with young'uns and sensitive souls ***by Josh Augustine***

MMOs are a lot like the sketchier parts of town: they can be a lot of fun, but they're not a great place to leave kids on their own. It isn't always easy to tell, however, which MMOs are appropriate for all ages. They might have kid-friendly themes, but how far do they go to protect kids from creeps? In order to find out, *PC Gamer* stress-tested the language filters of some of the most popular family-friendly MMOs with the worst words the English language has to offer. A colored dot summarizes that game's level of profanity screening: green (dependable), yellow (so-so) or red (for jaded kids only).

WIZARD 101

wizard101.com

COST: Free; purchase areas individually or a $6.95/month subscription.
PROTECTION (●): Names auto-generated; freeform, filtered chat only if parent allows it.
WHAT YOU DO: Build decks of spells like *Magic: The Gathering* to battle baddies.
IS IT FUN? *Wizard 101*'s traditional run-and-quest structure makes it a good introduction to the genre for young gamers, while the distinctive deck mechanic and turn-based combat ensures combat is manageable for new gamers and interesting for MMO vets. The spells show off some spectacular effects, like flying ninja pigs.

ETHER SAGA ONLINE

ethersagaonline.com

COST: Free; cash shop
PROTECTION (●): Standard *WoW*-style language filters on chat and names
WHAT YOU DO: Battle enemies, collect them as pets and combine them to make new allies.
IS IT FUN? The gameplay should be immediately familiar to MMO vets, with classes, professions and quests to keep you running around. Auto-run links on every quest objective makes it easy for younger players to accomplish goals, and collecting pets creates that "gotta catch 'em all" fever that'll keep kids and adults from yearning for grittier terrain.

LEGO UNIVERSE

legouniverse.com

COST: Unannounced monthly subscription
PROTECTION (●): Names generated or approved; chat only via pre-approved words and phrases.
WHAT YOU DO: Explore the charming world of piecemeal plastic, completing quests and collecting LEGO bricks to build, build, *build!*
IS IT FUN? It might even be more fun for you than your kids, if you had as much fun playing with LEGOs as we did. Hot spots around the world let you quick-build objects, like an elevator or radar dish, by using your "imagination" resource, earned through kills or busting up objects around you. My favorite use of this mechanic was destroying giant robots, then quickly using the pieces to build

turrets that help you fight. Vehicles such as racecars and rockets (for flying around the world) are created by swapping in modules, but you can create anything completely from scratch back on your private property using the bricks you've collected. Everything I played in the beta was fantastic and broke the standard MMO quest mold—one of the early areas had me climbing around a giant rock concert stage rebuilding instruments and playing them for the roaring audience.

TOONTOWN ONLINE

toontown.go.com

COST: Free; $10/month premium access
PROTECTION (●): Names generated or approved; chat only via pre-approved words and phrases.
WHAT YOU DO: Play minigames, race cars, do turn-based battle with NPCs, and decorate your house.
IS IT FUN? Like a good Pixar film, *Toontown Online*'s double-edged humor will please both adults and kids as you use pies and squirt guns to fight back boring businessmen who spew corporate buzzwords when they attack. Teaming up is encouraged and as easy as running up to someone, thanks to a simple jump-in-and-play system.

FREE REALMS

freerealms.com

COST: Free; cash shop and optional $10/month subscription that gives perks
PROTECTION (●): Names generated or approved; very strict chat filter (it even blocks "democrat" and "republican")
WHAT YOU DO: Level a persistent avatar through varied minigames; combat, socialize and decorate your house.
IS IT FUN? Activities are incredibly varied—each "job," such as soccer star, demolition derby driver and brawler, are leveled up individually—letting you mix things up without splitting time between characters. Minigames are a fun break from combat and socializing is strongly encouraged.

HERO 108: ONLINE

hero108online.com

COST: Free; cash shop
PROTECTION (●): Typical chat filters, name restrictions
WHAT YOU DO: Fight against animals and other players in fast-paced combat that eventually culminates in major raids and instances.
IS IT FUN? As an action-RPG, combat is quick and in realtime. The game is based on a Cartoon Network series of the same name, so fans of the show should love being able to hop into the roles of their favorite characters who serve as the games' eight classes, which are defined by their weapon of choice and the natural element they're associated with). Villains are similarly recognizable characters from the show, and even some of the quests are based on TV episodes. Features like an arrow that constantly points you in the direction of quest objectives, being able to send mail from anywhere and simplified controls (one button can be spammed for a basic attack but more advanced players will see better results by utilizing their cooldown powers) keep the game accessible to all ages. Even in its beta stage, the variety in quests and loot, plus the "enchanting" system, help keep things fresh.

FUSIONFALL

fusionfall.com

COST: Free
PROTECTION (●): Typical chat filters, name restrictions
WHAT YOU DO: Help famous Cartoon Network characters battle their invading doppelgangers through platform puzzles, questing and real-time combat.
IS IT FUN? For anyone that watches Cartoon Network, it's a complete blast running into and interacting with the characters you know and love, like Samurai Jack and Dexter. Even those oblivious to the shows can still enjoy the straightforward gameplay, and it's the only 100 percent free game on this list!

RACING STAR: COME ON BABY

comeonbaby.en.alaplaya.net

COST: Free; cash shop
PROTECTION (●): Very risky filters on chat and naming
WHAT YOU DO: Race babies in walkers or cars around tracks in different locales.
IS IT FUN? Nothing about this game's theme makes us very comfortable (especially the creepy mustachioed man in the panda suit that runs the cash shop), but the racing physics are executed well, with *Mario Kart*-style weapons and drifting to keep it interesting for more advanced drivers.

PENGUIN FARMER

penguinfarmer.com

COST: Free; cash shop
PROTECTION (●): Typical chat filters, name restrictions
WHAT YOU DO: Melt ice and expose land at the North Pole for you and your penguins to farm on.
IS IT FUN? If you can ignore the fact that you're teaching your kids that creatures from the South Pole are melting the ice caps at the North Pole in order to farm crops on land that shouldn't actually exist (we're no scientists, but we're pretty sure that icebergs are made entirely of ice), you might be able to enjoy the slow-paced farming.

Stormin' the City

Warhammer Online's city sieges are getting a welcome overhaul to reignite the conflict.

Fighting NPCs is for sissies; that's why the new city siege system is focused on pitting players against each other. We took to the fields and fought alonside *WAR*'s best RvRers to test out the new system in a vicious 24-versus-24 siege.

Phase 1: Stall Them

Our goal was simple: halt the Destruction players' advance through our city. Our team split up to intercept the enemy players escorting sappers (goblin NPCs carrying gunpowder kegs) toward our vital buildings, but with our focus divided between slowing down the goblins and killing the Destruction players defending them, we lost two buildings and were quickly pushed back to a central chokepoint, with three siege cannons and four hallways funneling in from all directions. Destruction pushed hard, but we held our ground until time ran out.

Phase 2: Payback

When the time ran out, two warlords (oversized champion NPCs) emerged from the keep behind us to lead the counter-attack against the Destruction players, whose own warlords had spawned at each of the points they'd captured from us in the first phase. It was an awesome feeling, rushing headlong into battle and duking it out against other players around these giants. We eventually took back the two points and then, with our warlords leading the way, pushed the Destruction players all the way back to their spawn point.

Phase 3: Punishment

The final battle was as epic as it gets: Emperor Karl Franz, leader of the Order, went toe-to-toe with Tchar'zanek, über Destruction overlord. They each promoted four random players to warlords, granting them incredible powers and an oversized stature to match. The scuffle took place in a courtyard and required a careful balance of helping kill the enemy leader while warding off the Destruction players crawling all over your back. It was hard-fought, but in the end, we had a dead demon and some of the best loot in the game to show for it.

IT FEELS LESS LONELY NOW

MANKIND NPCS INTRODUCED TO *FACE OF MANKIND*

Duplex Systems' complex MMOFPS, which (like *EVE Online*) centers on player-run organizations spurring interaction between players, has been invaded by robots, and everyone's glad to see it happen. More specifically, it's NPCs that are finally marching into the game, bringing a quest system that gives players more to do when nothing dramatic is going on between factions (which tends to happen in player-driven games). NPCs won't be defining this game by any means, but it's good to have more content!

WHO'S IN THERE?

STAR WARS NEW ALIENS, BEASTS AND DROIDS IN *THE OLD REPUBLIC*

TOR's Holonet encyclopedia now includes some of the new inhabitants that will appear in the hotly anticipated *Star Wars* MMO. Among those featured are a smaller, faster version of the monstrous Rancor (from *Return of the Jedi*) called a Gundark, which always travels in packs, and the AR-34 Enforcer Droid (pictured), which is used as a debt collector by the game's Hutt gangsters.

THE FIRST ONE'S ALWAYS FREE

LEVELING *AGE OF CONAN* GIVING AWAY CHARACTER LEVELS

Everyone likes free stuff, right? That certainly seems to hold true with *Age of Conan*'s latest giveaway: active accounts now earn one free level every four days (real time), which players can assign to any character level 30 or higher. The "offline character progression" was introduced as part of a minor patch and, uncharacteristic of MMO updates, was met with almost unanimous praise from players happy to have a little help leveling new alts.

EPIC LOOT OF THE MONTH

FREE REALMS DO YOUR BEST MARTY MCFLY IMPRESSION

In the spirit of family friendliness, we're highlighting a piece of loot that *isn't* intended for the express purpose of brutalizing, mutilating or decapitating another individual, but is still totally epic: hoverboards! The boards can be ridden as vehicles (player-made obstacle courses and race tracks to come), and are available in Dwarven-tech and pictured magical stone varieties.

DEV MAN TALKING

Mikail Yazbeck is a design freelancer at TaleWorlds Entertainment, where he's done level design and marketing on *Mount & Blade: Warband*. His favorite classics include *Magic Carpet 2*, *EarthSiege II*, *Time Commando* and *Rayman*.

As entertainment consumers, one of the reasons we invest in games is because they're interactive spaces. We delight in the fact that we can impress our decisions and our personalities into the characters we create. But even with the advent of "choice" as a game mechanic and constant back-of-the-box bullet point over the past decade, I believe that many of us have switched our brains from "read/write" to "read only."

In our youth, we'd don cardboard armor, snap a tree branch off a backyard oak, create an independent world that we had complete ownership over and then live there for hours. Imagination was a virtue to our play—we weren't simply consumers of entertainment, we were constant co-authors. It's easy get bogged down by structure as we grow up—the way we entertain ourselves can mirror that structure. Many of us come home each evening and watch the same sitcom or grind the same spots in an MMO out of habit.

Why do we fall into routines with our gaming experiences when there are so many brilliant, new moments we haven't tried yet? There's comfort in repetition. It could be that sandboxes and free-form gameplay are too daunting. Many gamers are hesitant to take "risks" with open-ended experiences in their valuable recreation time; how can we expect players to play a game with no end and no concrete, predefined goals?

Choose your own adventure

There are very few games that dare remove all linearity and leave the experience up to the gamer's imagination and ambition. While there is certainly merit in story-driven games, the experiences will largely be a shared one. Meanwhile, accomplishing your own goals and creating your own stories inside an interactive medium can leave you with an unparalleled sense of joy and can make you feel like a child again.

Games with no constraints are essentially betting on the player's imagination to drive their way through the game, while at the same time offering rewards equivalent to the player's ambition. Given the same backyard to play in, two different children can be bored or absolutely captivated on a Saturday afternoon; some of us will always need direction, some of us will always need a purpose, but if you dare to change the way you think about gaming you will find that there is something better than worrying about success or failure, making the right moves or picking the right abilities. If gamers would disregard character builds and play games in a little more free-spirited way, they are bound to have more fun than they might presume.

The intrinsic conundrum

In-game achievements are a way of extrinsically rewarding players for completing tasks within open-world games, rather than forcing them through a linear gauntlet. At best, achievements serve as a conversation between the designers and the players. They let designers issue challenges, and often encourage players to play longer and do things they might not have considered if left to their own devices. At worst, achievements can stifle and snuff out exploration and creative playing styles. Assigning arbitrary value to certain tasks places a bias on them as the tasks that are more valuable within the context of a game, and can actually hinder appreciation of the game's offerings. I prefer to think that players would rather enjoy a game on their own terms, and let their imaginations be their guide. ■

> "We've switched our brains from 'read/write' to 'read only.'"

Like this double-edged sword, achievements are a double-edged sword.

IN SIMULATION

When he isn't hooking a vibrating floor-polisher up to his computer chair, **Andy Mahood** is currently playing *iRacing.com*, *DCS: Black Shark*, *Live For Speed S2*, *rFactor*, and *RACE On*.

You rarely encounter full-motion simulators—those servo-controlled platforms that pitch and roll paying customers around in a virtual race car or jet fighter—outside of fairgrounds and theme parks. For good reason: Most of these suckers weigh a ton and cost more than a house.

It's been a while since I scoped out the market's home motion-simulator options—they're traditionally over-priced and impractical—but I recently came across a product that had me salivating and murmuring to myself in tongues (and it does take some effort to make that happen). It's called an APEX sc830, and this nifty contraption can turn your favorite racing sim into a full-on roller coaster ride.

Built by Atlanta-based SimCraft, the APEX sc830 is a 3DOF (three degrees of freedom: pitch, roll, yaw) motion simulator that ships in a variety of guises, with the basic, unaccessorized model retailing for a cool $25,000. True, that's still awfully pricey, but the aforementioned impracticalities have all but disappeared. That's because SimCraft built the APEX sc830 on a compact tubular steel space frame that only weighs a few hundred pounds and handily fits in most household spaces. Even better, virtually every recent PC race sim of note—whether from SimBin, iRacing, ISI, Live For Speed or Codemasters—can interface seamlessly with the apparatus without modification.

Like all motion simulators, the sc830 works by tricking your inner ear into thinking it's accelerating, decelerating and cornering at breakneck speeds by rapidly orienting your body (in its form-fitting Recaro racing seat) forward, backward and sideways. It accomplishes this with electromechanical actuators that can snap the sc830's payload into different positions in mere milliseconds. A backward tip pushes you into the seat to make you think you're accelerating; a forward pitch replicates braking deceleration; rapid lateral leans generate corner g-loading; and side-to-side yaw action help sell the feeling of a rally car drifting on gravel.

SimCraft's sc830 Full Motion Simulator. Ain't she a beaut?

Earfoolery

None of this inner-ear fakery would work without the correct focal point, and in the sc830's case, that entails three 24-inch LCD panels that provide a 110-degree field of view. These panels, which use AMD's latest Eyefinity GPU multipanel display technology, move with you through every twist and roll to sell the fact you're behind the wheel of a thoroughbred race car.

> "Turn your favorite racing sim into a roller coaster ride."

The SimCraft folks didn't skimp on the peripherals, either. The sc830 uses Logitech's force-feedback, hand-stitched leather G27 Racing Wheel in conjunction with a set of Cannon Simulation Technologies stainless steel pedals (complete with pressure-sensitive braking action). A high-performance, quad-core Dell XPS computer keeps everything running smoothly via SimCraft's proprietary CraftCon control panel software. Cautious types can even fit a five-point racing harness to that Recaro bucket seat. (Flight sim enthusiasts can also swap out the wheel and pedals for a flight yoke, throttle and rudder pedals.)

They Build, You Build

Of course, all of these extras can add as much as $10,000 to a base price that's already unaffordable for 99 percent of all sim racers. Fortunately, and likely due to its roots in the DIY sim arena, SimCraft provides a much less expensive STAR (Some Time and Assembly Required) option for sim fans who aren't afraid to break out some tools and sweat. The STAR 2DOF and 3DOF kits (priced at $2,995 and $5,995) deliver all of the critical components—including the core electromechanical linear actuators, frictionless bearings and USB motion controller—as well as the necessary technical drawings to construct your own motion simulator frame from metal tubing or lumber from your local supply yard. ($6,000 will also buy you a bolt-together, extruded aluminum 2DOF chassis.)

Whether you fancy the DIY option or SimCraft's pricier sc830 turnkey system, true full motion simulation has just moved one step closer to universal accessibility. ■

ALTERNATE LIVES

Desslock thinks that teetering from a broken highway off-ramp in *Fallout 3* or the view from the top of the mountain in *Risen* tops any roller coaster for thrills. He's now grounded in the depths of *Avernum 6*.

No red-blooded adventurer disdains a theme park. Where else do we have the opportunity to propel ourselves at jet speeds without risking the longevity of our precious ugly sacks of mostly water? You even get to interact with dolphins—evil beings that may be the *real* masters of planet Earth.

Theme parks offer a thrill a minute; an opportunity to experience one rare, exciting experience after another. The only problem is that they're supersaturated with bloated homo sapiens savagely chomping on corn dogs and adding an interminable two hours in line for each 90-second ride. Theme parks would be ideal if all other visitors are relegated to the Nine Hells, where they justly belong as dinner guests of Asmodeus.

Everybody loves Wookieeland

Several popular game series have adopted the "ideal theme park" school of design, consisting of one spectacle after another with almost no downtime in between. Games like *Modern Warfare 2* constantly funnel us through one rigidly linear, ludicrously over-the-top level after another, with no time "wasted" on exploring the setting, improving skills or considering our next move. It's like being able to coast up Space Mountain right after getting soaked on the log ride and barely retaining your popcorn against gravity's pull on Top Spin.

For a lot of gamers, that's probably the ideal design, judging by the phenomenal commercial success of the *Call of Duty* series. No busywork, no waiting, no navigating around kiddieland, no uncertainty, and escapism over realism. One of the most popular RPGs ever, BioWare's *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, is essentially set in a theme park rather than a virtual world. Instead of offering the opportunity to actually freely explore a living, breathing *Star Wars* setting, you're given a handful of rides through key franchise locations: the Jedi temple, Wookieeland (aka Kashyyyk) and, naturally, Tatooine, replete with quest-giving NPC kiosks. It's still a great game, but it had the least RPG depth of any BioWare game (aside from perhaps *Jade Empire*). The more recent *Dragon Age: Origins* and even the *Mass Effect* games do a better job of injecting their role-playing substance.

It may make me a fuddy-duddy, but for me theme park designs strip out the heart of a role-playing game. To be allowed to meaningfully roleplay a character of your own choosing, you need to be able to do what you want, when you want, how you want. You *need* to walk to the next ride. You *have* to pay the entry fee in order to wait in line. Rather than listening to the clown telling you to step right up for your next adventure, you've got to be able to hop on the table and kick his coffee into his face, or drop some poison into that joker's drink so he'll bleat his nonsense nevermore.

> "'Theme park' designs strip out the heart of an RPG."

Obsidian's RPGs are never theme parks. Go anywhere you want in *Fallout: New Vegas* and mete out your own brand of justice.

Butting in line

It may be boring to wait in line at a real-world theme park, but it's a lot less dreary in a role-playing game because people blocking the path to your goal can usually be smacked down with a mace. In an RPG, you can often abbreviate a line by sufficiently exploring the world to find a way to butt in ahead or gain early access to a powerful item that makes lesser objectives moot. In an RPG, the journey and the choices you make on it are the real game, far more than the set piece encounters or discoveries. Your mother was right: too much cotton candy *can* rot your brain. ■

FACE OFF

Will *The Old Republic* unseat *WoW* as MMO king?

YES Star Wars is more popular than *WoW* is, was, or ever will be. Also, lightsabers.

NO *World of Warcraft* is The Beatles of MMOs; you can't reproduce a worldwide phenomenon.

Evan Lahti is Senior Editor of PC Gamer. He's actually a Star Trek fan, but he hates *WoW*'s $25 horses-made-out-of-stars that much.

Josh Augustine is Associate Editor of PC Gamer. He writes love letters to *World of Warcraft* on a daily basis and totally wants to marry it.

EL: I'm not an MMO player, but I think *TOR* will be the first massive-scaled experience to capture the attention of action gamers like me. Even after the prequel films, *Star Wars* remains the most beloved and profitable entertainment franchise in the world. The films alone have grossed an estimated $4.4 billion worldwide. Even if I wasn't fist-pumping in excitement that BioWare, one of the top developers in the world today, is making *The Old Republic*, we can be confident that *Star Wars*' massive mainstream appeal will drive *TOR* to exceed *WoW*'s one-year sales and subscriber pace.

JA: I've got nothing against *Star Wars*, but I'm not sure that you're remembering just how fast *WoW* exploded onto the scene. Five months in, it had already shattered all records with 1.5 million subscribers. By its first birthday, 4.5 million players were aboard the *WoW* train! There's no disputing *Star Wars*' brand power, but remember that it takes a lot more than a license to make a phenomenal MMO. *Star Trek Online*, *Age of Conan* and *Warhammer* have all failed to come anywhere near *WoW*'s numbers… and need I remind you of *Star Wars Galaxies*?

EL: Okay, okay, you've got me there. *Galaxies* was a sin against god. But from everything we've seen, BioWare doesn't plan on repeating SOE's biggest mistake of having players relive the amazing, epic mythology of *Star Wars* through unepic tasks like hunting for wamp rats, collecting their pelts and turning those pelts into a hat. If you did it long enough (and maxed out a bunch of specializations), you had *a chance* of becoming a Jedi. In *TOR*, everyone can be a Jedi or Sith, or choose to be another iconic character like a Smuggler or a Bounty Hunter. You're a hero from the start.

What would "**unseating *WoW***" mean? For the sake of argument, *TOR* would need 5 million active subscribers one year after launching in 2011.

JA: BioWare's proven it can make a great *Star Wars* game, but can it make a great MMO? *TOR*'s grand mission designs mean they'll have to be instanced for your group, akin to *Guild Wars*. That's great for reducing server load, but it quickly segments the population and erodes at that "massive" feeling of the world. I'm also worried that *TOR*'s "flashpoint" encounters—multiplayer missions where you and a teammate collaborate on dialogue decisions to affect a mutual outcome—could turn roleplaying moments into decisions by committee or make room for griefing. Choosing how to respond to NPCs is the most fundamental, identity-defining action RPGs have. BioWare makes incredible games, and *TOR*'s advanced class system, which allows for dedicated healers and tanks, is reassuring. But they've never made an MMO, and it's a bit presumptuous to think they'll master this incredibly complex genre on their first attempt.

EL: Ah, but Blizzard had never made an MMO before *WoW*, either. And that's exactly why I'm so excited—BioWare's background is in creating epic stories and making players feel the effects of their decisions, not in churning out cookie-cutter MMOs. The studio is taking an approach that relies on its core competency—storytelling. I think we underestimate what a fully voiced MMO will do to draw in everyone that's played and enjoyed *Mass Effect*, for example, but couldn't stand the clunky UI and presentation that MMOs are known for.

JA: That's all true, but Blizzard isn't just sitting around on its butt waiting to be conquered. *WoW* has a proven record of dedicating its limitless resources to the development of ground-breaking industry innovations like phasing technology (which allows instanced elements in open-world areas—infinitely superior to *TOR*'s presumably primitive instance system), while continuing to adopt and refine every good idea that other MMOs come out with. Even if EA and BioWare commit the same level of resources (and it sounds like they are), I'm not sure they have the experience to use those same resources as effectively.

EL: BioWare isn't working in a vacuum here—it has all of EA's resources to pull from, including the brains of MMO veterans EA Mythic. And don't you think *Warcraft* players are ready for something new? *WoW* reached 11.5 million subscribers in 2008, but it hasn't grown since then. ■

PREVIEWS

STARCRAFT II: WINGS OF LIBERTY

HANDS-ON As release looms, we test out a trio of new campaign missions

On my last visit to Blizzard's office, I played the first seven missions of the *StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty* campaign. Each had a unique gimmick, such as rising and falling lava, that made it a unique experience. This time, I returned to play the next three—including a Protoss side-mission—plus a couple of Blizzard's new challenge modes.

"Welcome to the Jungle"

In the first, Raynor has to help his ally, Gabriel Tosh, score some Terrazine gas from the Protoss world of Bel'Shir.

Starting from a small base in the bottom-right corner of the map, I had to venture out with Marines, Marauders, Goliaths and Diamondback Tanks (a long-range laser hover-tank exclusive to single-player) and retrieve seven canisters of Terrazine from 11 geysers scattered around the terrain. Protoss religious fanatics expressed dissatisfaction with my plans and dispatched drones to seal the geysers.

My first try ended badly due to overconfidence. After picking up the first four canisters with only light resistance, I sent SCVs to gather four batches of Terrazine at once. At least three would make it back to base, right? Unfortunately, this triggered a massive counterattack of Zealots, Stalkers and Scouts that destroyed the SCVs and their escorts and smashed through my base defenses. Oops. The second time I spent a little more time building up my forces and hired War Pig mercenaries (beefed-up Marines with unique models) before making my grab for the Terrazine.

I pointed the laser drill at the approaching Protoss heavies, popping them like soap bubbles.

"The Dig"

Next, acting on intel from Tychus Finley, Raynor's troops land on planet Xil with a small force in search of an ancient artifact. My troops immediately met with Protoss resistance and were reinforced with Siege Tanks to crack the enemy Photon Cannon defenses. I assumed control of a substantial base left behind by a previous, ill-fated expedition, plus a massive laser drill that immediately began chewing through the layered doors of an ancient vault.

I just had to hold out until the laser punctured the doors, which looked easy enough until blips appeared on my radar indicating heavy Protoss units, like Archons and Colossus walkers, were heading my way. Turning the laser drill away from the vault, I pointed it at the heavies, popping them like soap bubbles. The mining ray saved my bacon, but the more I used the drill's power for defense, the longer it took to finish drilling.

This was the stand-out mission of the new batch—even though there have been two other defense missions, the laser drill was a fantastic and unique addition.

"Zeratul's Memories"

As promised, Blizzard is delivering a handful of Protoss missions as well. In this one, Raynor experiences a "flashback" about the Protoss leader Zeratul's search for clues about the ancient Xal'Naga race; I controlled Zeratul as he stealthed his way through Zerg-infested territory. This was a puzzle mission—I had to make extensive use of Zeratul's teleportation and stasis powers to evade and disable Zerg stealth detectors, such as Spore Crawlers, in conjunction with a squad of Stalkers that could knock down flying units. As hero missions go, it was a good one, and a good primer for learning to effectively use stealth to avoid detection.

Challenges

I tried my hand at two of the nine challenge modes that Blizzard hopes will teach players to compete in the harsh multiplayer arena. In "Psi Assault," I was given control of a Protoss force of six High Templars and nine Sentries—spell-casting units with little or no direct attacks—to hold out against attacking waves. This is definitely a great way to hone micromanagement skills, which are absolutely essential for making use of some of the more powerful units.

Another crucial skill is knowing how to cast abilities like the Stalker's Blink teleport with your eyes closed—the mission "Harbinger of Death" is designed to teach you just that. I directed a large Protoss army, exterminating as many Zerg as possible in a short time limit. The catch: Clickable buttons on the UI are disabled, forcing you to use keyboard commands for all unit abilities. As a closet UI-clicker, it took me a few attempts to get a respectable score, but in the end, I returned home to await the release of the full game with my head held high. ■

Dan Stapleton

READ ME
PUBLISHER Blizzard
DEVELOPER Blizzard
LINK starcraft2.com

Chunks of plot are delivered between missions via news reports covering your actions and chats with Tychus and Gabriel.

My friendly neighborhood Science Lady explains that Terrazine is like Vespene, but it's also a stimulant drug.

Finding Protoss artifacts or Zerg juice lets you climb these research trees and unlock powerful upgrades.

Zeratul's teleporter gets him over gaps and out of danger.

Please let me use this in multiplayer, oh please oh please oh please.

Mercs come with custom paint jobs.

Release JULY 27

Rock beats scissors. Scissors beats paper. Propeller-blade boomerang beats spinal cord.

RAGE

NEW INFO Is id's first new game in six years simply a broader *Borderlands*?

"Demons, aliens and Nazis were the stars of id Software's three most famous games," says lead designer Tim Willits. "We needed to make sure *Rage* wasn't just mutants."

This is the design ethos behind Rage. The team at id has become very good at creating satisfying shotguns, detailed corridors, beautiful engines and the color brown, but it knows that today's gamers want more, and it's determined to give people what they want. *Rage* features all of the above, but only as the core of a more expansive, open-world post-apocalyptia.

Willits begins our presentation of *Rage* driving on the open road, surrounded by red rock and blue sky. This is a wasteland, but it's colorful. This is also a glimpse of the first, most obvious thing *Rage* does differently than previous id games: vehicle combat. Two bandits give chase in ramshackle buggies similar to our own, and there's a brief fight before our mounted machinegun rips through them and we arrive unscathed at the town of Wellspring.

In a world destroyed by an asteroid strike, *Rage* casts you as a survivor from an Arc, one of the giant spaceships launched before the asteroid hit. After falling back to Earth, you have to survive in a rusting world of people who hate you.

Each new area will present the player with a new toy: a new ammo type, a new gadget.

Wellspring is one of the world's few safe areas—it's where you'll gather missions, buy weapons and volunteer for races. The buildings are dusty, a mixture of neon signs and corrugated metal, but like the world beyond, it's still colorful and filled with characters.

Rage isn't a completely open world: You'll have some choice over which quests you pursue and in what order, but it's a directed experience. Discovering the truth behind the Authority will be core to the player's story. What we know so far is that they're performing experiments on mutants, making them stronger and more vicious; that they may have created the mutants in the first place; and that they're rounding up survivors from the Arcs.

We meet a character named Ginny that appreciates our cause. She's willing to supply some new clothes—our Arc uniform makes us a target for the Authority. "I hate the Authority more than I need money," she says. As Willits continues his tour, sirens all over town begin to scream. There's trouble down at the old well, and someone better go check it out. Carlson, the Wellmaster, explains that Bandits are planning on poisoning the town's water supply.

The well turns out to be a series of gray concrete rooms and corridors, filled with crates and flaming barrels. It's like a switch has been flicked somewhere, and all the color and interest was sucked straight out of the game.

I'm told that each new area will present the player with a new toy: a new ammo type, a new gadget, something to make the combat in that area distinct. Down in the well, we've picked up some electrobolts. Willits comes across two bandits chatting, both standing in a puddle of water. He shoots the water with the electrobolt, frying the bandits. It's a bit familiar.

Thankfully, a few of the other weapons look more novel. The next bandit bounds around and over obstacles, and comes running straight at the player, but Willits quickly beheads him with a boomerang. In the room after that, Willits drops a remote-controlled car, steers it towards a group of enemies and detonates it.

These items and others, like turrets and robo-spider sentries, can be bought from a shop back in Wellspring, but they can also be crafted by the player using pieces of scavenged scrap or loot from fallen enemies. Yes, *Rage* is an id Software game that includes looting and crafting.

As our demo continues, we're given glimpses of other parts, including a facility filled with a heavily armed gang of bandits called The Wasted. We're also told that when you die, "nanotrites" stimulate your heart back to life, letting you seamlessly continue.

But the overwhelming feeling after seeing *Rage* is that, although it's a big step for id Software, it's not a big step for gamers. The colorful wasteland recalls a more detailed *Borderlands*. The electrobolts are straight out of *BioShock*. The ramshackle cities filled with traders feel like a dozen post-apocolyptic games, including *Fallout*.

Experience has brought id competence; but we're worried that dev is moving in the shadows of the developers it once inspired. ■

Graham Smith

READ ME
PUBLISHER id Software
DEVELOPER Bethesda Softworks
LINK www.rage-game.com

Release 2011

Imagine *Borderlands* with better AI and enemies that bound over cover, and you're halfway there.

"Now, now, Tentaclo...it's time to go to school like a big abomination."

"Your wallet and your moist towelettes."

After MySpace fell, teens turned to graffiti walls for narcissistic portraits.

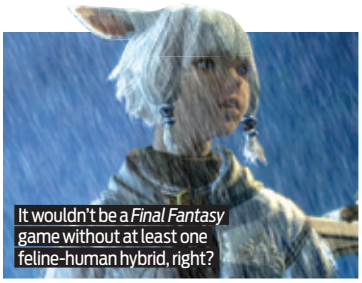
The people of this land are very forthcoming with their personalities.

FINAL FANTASY XIV

FIRST LOOK Some slick new tech marks *Final Fantasy*'s return to online

It's been nearly seven years since a *Final Fantasy* game made its way to the PC. When *FFXI*, the previous MMO in the franchise, was released in 2003, we gave it an Editor's Choice award for its "beautiful 3D world, deep character system and innovative combat options." But that was in a pre-*WoW* world, so how is Square Enix planning to have its new MMO, *Final Fantasy XIV*, make a splash in the online community this time around?

The game plan is to leverage the impressive graphical power of the *Final Fantasy XIII* engine to make *FFXIV*'s graphics some of the most striking we've seen in an MMO to date. Hair flows naturally, and first-rate cut scenes integrate your character seamlessly into the world. There is also some technical wizardry behind *FFXIV*'s complex instancing mechanics—when you accept a quest, the appropriate enemies are spawned for everyone in the world to see, but only you are able to engage them. This technique eliminates kill-stealing without the awkward problem of players appearing to be swinging at nothing but air. It does have the side effect of introducing enemies that won't react to your presence, but the trade-off looks like a good deal.


It wouldn't be a *Final Fantasy* game without at least one feline-human hybrid, right?

Like *FFXI*, characters in *FFXIV* aren't restricted to a single role or class. Instead, switching your primary weapon (while out of combat) automatically changes your "class." The different roles (18 announced so far) are broken down into four categories: War (i.e. fighter, monk, archer), Magic (casters), Hand (crafters) and Land (gatherers), and are leveled individually. Combat plays like a hybrid of turn-based and real-time, marked by limited mobility and long global cooldowns; in the preview, the player was able to use an ability every four to seven seconds. That's an agonizingly long time for twitch gamers who are used to spamming attacks every second, but it could be the perfect fit for those looking for combat at a more relaxing, controlled pace. ■

Josh Augustine

READ ME
PUBLISHER Square Enix
DEVELOPER Square Enix
LINK finalfantasyxiv.com

Release 2010

BATTLE OF THE IMMORTALS

HANDS-ON THE LAND OF KILLER KOALAS, BESPECTACLED FELINES AND GIANT WHEELS OF DEATH

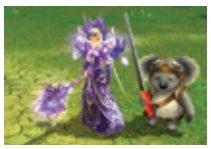
RELEASE 2010 **LINK** boi.perfectworld.com

I thought it was too good to be true the first time I saw it, but 10 minutes later it was still there: a saw-wielding, goggle-wearing koala was my new brother-in-arms against the raging Egyptian undead around me. *Battle of the Immortals*, in many ways, plays like a typical action-RPG—you click like crazy and cast powerful abilities to mow down the constant stream of enemies in front of you. That's nothing new, but *Botl*'s secret weapon is its completely off-the-wall vehicles, sidekicks and weapons. These are our four favorites from open beta. ***Josh Augustine***

Terror Wheel

Nothing says "Get out of my way" like a 90-ton stone wheel covered in spikes hauling toward you at break-neck speed. This steampunk *Indiana Jones* nightmare was by far our favorite ride to cruise around in between quests.

Immortal Koala


It's a koala who kills his enemies with an oversized saw; we're not sure much more needs to be said about this apex of evolution, other than "I want one."

Cat with Sunglasses

The koala may rock the damage meters, but when it comes time to party, he's a real downer. That's when we bust out our very accurately named Cat with Sunglasses to make a splash in the club scene. Bowties and shades are *always* classy.

War Chariot

As much as we love crushing noobs in our Terror Wheel, sometimes it's nice to have a chauffeur do the driving for awhile. The bestial abomination pulling the War Chariot doesn't say much, but he's a hard worker and can move our boat-on-wheels at an astonishing pace.

DISCIPLES III: RENAISSANCE

PLAYED IT Giants, dragons, unicorns gather, agree to fight on grid

It's hard to find a more ridiculous target for your medieval weapons of war than some poor player's unicorn-filled fancy town. But that's not an over-the-top scenario for *Disciples III*. The game rubs the best parts of gothic fantasy with a fine-grit sandpaper, delivering a world of turn-based, strategic gameplay that includes everyone's favorite fantasy stereotypes, without many of the limitations of its five-year-old predecessor.

Disciples III is set, once again, in the world of Nevendaar, roughly a century after the events of *Disciples II*. The usual fantasy-esque turmoil of struggle and conflict runs rampant throughout the world until a star (an "angel") crashes to earth, shaking up the magical status quo.

The game's three most powerful factions each seek the cratered angel for their own ends. The subsequent three campaigns deliver roughly 70 hours of total gameplay split into six or seven missions per faction: humans, undead and elves. Each campaign grants you a single major-hero character that you carry through levels, growing in power and experience as you build towns, topple dragons, recruit armies and hire other heroes to aid in your quest.

HP-stacked instruments of death like Titans and Demons return.

This template is familiar to anyone that played *Disciples II* or *Heroes of Might & Magic*, but the nitty-gritty details of *D3* and *D2* couldn't be any more dissimilar. All of your combat units still gain experience for performing tasks across the overland map and, more commonly, killing everything in sight. They're also equipped with a *Diablo*-style skills tree that allows you to customize your characters.

More importantly, your army volunteers can now move, and creatures in *Disciples III* have finally broken free of their digital bonds and can now run amok on the larger hexagonal battlefield. Akella has built in a few game-changing rewards for doing so: You can make tactical use of environmental cover, chug your party over to predefined "nodes" that grant additional combat bonuses for fighting on them, or have front-line party members absorb enemy attacks to protect your "spongy spellcasters" in the back. We love the sound of that tactical nuance.

Clash of the titans

Disciples II's ultra-badass "supercreatures," HP-stacked instruments of death like Titans and Demons, return in greater quantities this time around. Not only has Akella increased the number of units that you can slot into one huge, dominating force, but you can now supplement your army by casting spells during combat or by using a rune to slap a pre-saved spell onto a single unit per battle.

The entire game has also broken out the two-dimensional gameplay of *Disciples II*. Every inch of the landscape is rendered with the same gritty, contrast-laden style as before, but with brand-new 3D treatment allows you to view your terraformed battlescape from any angle.

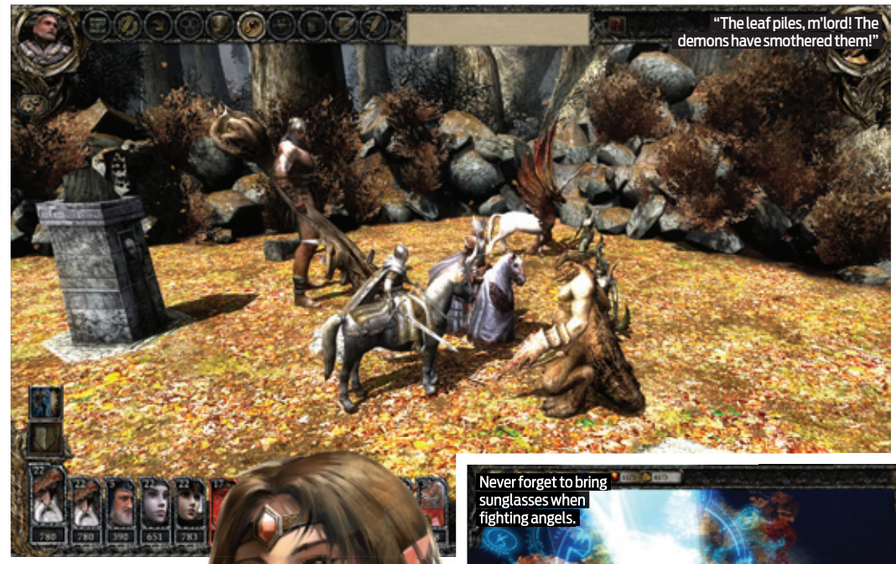
You'll have to wait just a bit longer for Akella to finish its turn—*Disciples III* isn't expected to hit American shelves until the third quarter of 2010. But like any turn-based strategy title, sometimes it's all kittens and butterflies until a player sends a 20,000-strong army to your front steps. It's been four years since we last heard a peep from the *Disciples* series, but Akella's vision for *Disciples III* looks like it's going to make a significant impact in the world of top-down strategy. ■

David Murphy

READ ME
PUBLISHER Kalypso
DEVELOPER Akella
LINK Disciples3.ru
RETRO DISCIPLES 2 VIDEO bit.ly/bif2Wx

Release AUTUMN

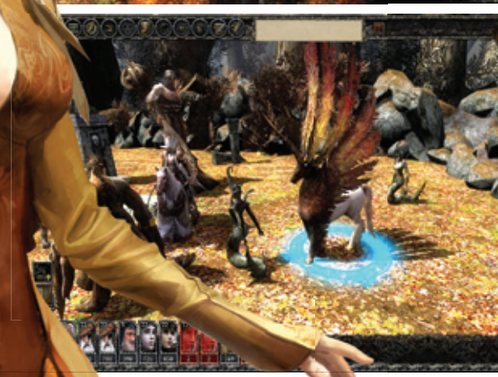
Thank goodness the ground here is divided into hexes. Now we can fight!



"The leaf piles, m'lord! The demons have smothered them!"

If *Disiples III* is an intricate game of medieval rock, paper, scissors, Blood Dragons would definitely beat horses.

Never forget to bring sunglasses when fighting angels.



Elven fact #39: They're powered by cleavage.

Raptors hate lightning. And cinnamon.

TWO WORLDS II

FIRST LOOK Back for seconds—a stellar RPG stand-in for *Elder Scrolls VI*?

READ ME
PUBLISHER SouthPeak Games
DEVELOPER TopWare Interactive
LINK twoworlds2.com

What a difference a change of scenery makes. We're looking over one of the most colorful, original fantasy settings we've seen in years—Antaloor. It has dinosaurs. It has wizards. Is this really the same Antaloor we played in 2007? It's hard to believe that *Two Worlds*' world used to be dull and ugly. We're standing atop savannah cliffs, admiring the sunset hues tingeing the medieval panorama. Three years ago, *Two Worlds* was something we wrote off as a second cousin to *Oblivion*—an engine upgrade and a visual facelift later, we're warming up to the sequel.

Rescued by orcs after years of imprisonment at the hands of your arch-nemesis Gandohar, you're let loose into an open world. Pursuing your captor's ultimate destruction is your long-term goal, but there are many distractions and side-missions to dig into in your travels through Antaloor's landscape, which is 30 percent bigger than before. New islands off the coast of the main continent are enticing getaways for exploration. A smooth layer of physics, detailed visual textures and dynamic lighting make these locales come bursting to life.

It has dinosaurs. It has wizards. It's hard to believe that *Two Worlds* used to be dull and ugly.

Two Worlds II has a lot more in store for players than mere sight-seeing. There's plenty of loot-carrying fodder roaming the wilds for you to beat the gold out of: wolves, wild boars and freakier fare like demons, mutated undead and fanged dragon beasts.

The combat system has been completely reworked to give you greater flexibility in slaughtering these slithering masses. Weapons and ability-boosting armor can be hot-swapped from user-defined presets to let you adjust battle tactics on the fly. And instead of selling off redundant gear to shopkeepers, you can break almost any item down into its basic material components and then use those resources to buff up your favorite pieces of equipment.

The retooled magic system is one of the more exciting tweaks to the formula. Component cards that you collect can be dropped into amulets to custom-craft spells. There are tons of modifiers to tinker with, and multiple spells can be stacked to produce wild results. One powerful combination we saw produced a cascade of icy energy blasts that arced off in different directions. On contact, each bolt erupted in a spray of energy and summoned zombie warriors to charge at the nearest adversary.

TW2 will add at least two new modes to its base campaign as well. PvP multiplayer will return alongside a new co-op mode that features a separate character with their own story. The development team is also working on something it's calling "village mode," which gives each player a hub world to govern over. The village will grow and evolve with your character, providing important resources for fellow adventurers to covet and acquire when they visit.

Even with more work still to go before the game ships this summer, *Two Worlds II*'s massive overhauls may make it a fine stand-in during another *Elder Scrolls*-less year. Antaloor is calling, and we can't wait to return. ■

Nathan Meunier

Sprint, sail, ride a horse, teleport. *TW2* seems to understand the value of letting players move freely through its open world.

"Welcome to P.F. Chang's. Please leave your halberd in the designated rack."

Do not adjust your magazine. This isn't an image from the next *Turok* game.

Get equipped: *Two Worlds II*'s tactical tools of the trade

Gear cannibalization
Weapons and equipment can be broken down to their core material components that can be used to beef up your favorite gear to the max.

The Oculus
This floating magical device lets you survey the battlefield from the sky and can be upgraded to explode when enemies are afoot.

Build-a-spell
Stacking spell components allows you to create omega spells, like a multi-pronged ice bolt barrage that summons spectral warriors.

Teleporters
While you also get a horse to ride, a network of teleporters let you fast-travel between locations into instant-adventuring action on a whim.

Release SUMMER 2010

Release Meter

Miles above the gameosphere (and safely out of reach of developers' anti-air missile batteries), our high-powered surveillance telescope/orbital Denny's array monitors the timescape of gaming release dates, spying on development studios. Every four weeks, our Release Meter Cosmomonkey journeys to the station to retrieve this data. Godspeed, little monkey.

Q3 2010	
Arcania: Gothic 4	JoWood
Brink	Bethesda
Dead Rising 2	Capcom
F.E.A.R. 3	Warner Bros.
Kane & Lynch 2: Dog Days	Square Enix
Mafia II	2K
LEGO Harry Potter: Years 1-4	Warner Bros.
Rise of Prussia	Paradox
R.U.S.E.	Ubisoft
StarCraft II: Wings of Liberty	Blizzard
Test Drive Unlimited 2	Atari
Two Worlds II	SouthPeak
Victoria II	Paradox

Q4 2010	
Battlestar Galactica Online	Bigpoint
Call of Duty: Black Ops	Activision
Crysis 2	EA
DeathSpank	Hothead
Deus Ex: Human Revolution	Square Enix
Elemental: War of Magic	Stardock
Fallout: New Vegas	Bethesda
Frozen Synapse	Mode 7 Games
Ghost Recon: Future Soldier	Ubisoft
Lionheart: King's Crusade	Paradox
Medal of Honor	EA
Need For Speed World Online	EA
Portal 2	Valve
Rage	Betheda Softworks
Red Orchestra: Heroes of Stalingrad	TBD
Sid Meier's Civilization V	2K Games
Subversion	Introversion
World of Tanks	Wargaming.net
World of Warcraft: Cataclysm	Blizzard

2011: THE TOMORROW ZONE	
American McGee's Alice II	EA
Boulder	ACE Team
Diablo III	Blizzard
Guild Wars 2	NCSoft
Jagged Alliance 3	Bit-Composer
Mass Effect 3	EA
MechWarrior	(TBD)
Monaco	Pocketwatch Games
Star Wars: The Old Republic	EA

CYBERPUNK RENAISSANCE

Against the odds, **DEUS EX: HUMAN REVOLUTION** might just be the game we've been waiting for ***By Tom Francis***

RELEASE 2011

The scope is focused on a spot above the security guard's head, but the crossbow's electronic targeting reticule shows how far the bolt will drop in flight: enough to hit him in the neck.

Twunk.

It hits exactly as advertised, nailing the guard to a shipping container. He dangles from his involuntary piercing silently, above the pair of fellow guards whose backs he was supposed to be watching.

Jensen (the shirtless guy on the page to the left) leaps into action. Both guards are skewered horrifically on flat-tipped blades from his wrists, which retract beneath articulated prosthetic hands before their bodies hit the ground.

Someone playing a new *Deus Ex* just did something completely awesome, and I am encountering an unexpected emotion.

I am massively excited.

This wasn't supposed to happen. *Deus Ex* is only 10 years old, but it has a status beyond classic: making a *Deus Ex 3* is like painting a "Mona Lisa 2." And it's not Leonardo da Vinci doing it: none of the minds behind *Human Revolution* at Eidos Montreal team worked on the original.

I went in expecting, at best, a promising action game with spiritual elements of the classic, but not enough to be worthy of its name. I was ready to defend it on those grounds—look, guys, it might not be *Deus Ex*, but give it a chance. Then I actually saw it played, and the thought changed to, "Whoa, this is actually *Deus Ex*."

So I'm going to do precisely what I was going to tell everyone not to do: compare it directly to *Deus Ex*.

If you never played *Deus Ex*, hopefully I can explain why its name inspires such reverence. If you did, hopefully I can explain why I'm confident that *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* will also inspire.

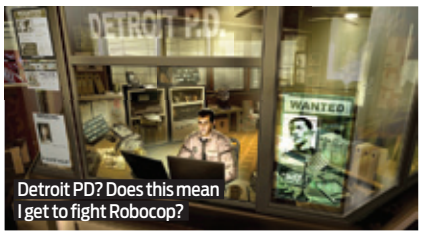
Deus Ex didn't invent a new genre or master an existing one. It just showed how to combine a little of each to make a more flexible and freeform experience than the first-person thrill rides we were used to. You were an international anti-terror agent who could sneak like a ghost, hack security systems, find new allies through dialogue and set up ambushes to get the jump on unsuspecting enemies.

Deus Ex: Human Revolution is careful to carry over each part of that template. It reinvents them all to be a lot smoother, slicker and more violent than the original, but that careful balance of options is preserved. You sneak, shoot, talk or hack your way through a global conspiracy plot.

After seeing *Human Revolution* played at length, I'm a convert.

I love *Deus Ex* like nothing else. I've argued for it to be number one in our Top 100 every year I've worked at *PC Gamer*, and I've written a whole feature about its first level. So I'm not the kindest judge of new games that take on its name and change its style in the name of updating it for a modern audience. But after finally seeing *Human Revolution* being played, at length, in front of me, I'm a convert. I doubt it will be *better* than *Deus Ex*, but I think it might be comparable. Having a new, gorgeous, vicious game of that caliber on the horizon is giving me palpitations.

The guns are surprisingly satisfying for a nonshooter.



Detroit PD? Does this mean I get to fight Robocop?

"Light Filing" aug primed.

You can shoot all of the people some of the time, or some of the people all of the time, but you can't shoot all of the people all of the time.

That's one hell of a potato gun.

Assault and battery

So back to Edward knife-hands, aka Adam Jensen. *Human Revolution*'s main man is a genuine robocop—Jensen can augment his body to become a mind-controlling, wall-busting, bomb-sneezing vessel of destruction (see "Anatomy of a Cyborg" on p. 54). The original *Deus Ex*'s standard-issue pistol and electro-prod seem like Nerf toys in comparison to Jensen's full suite of abilities.

But that doesn't make *Human Revolution* an outright action game. The fiction forms a believable basis for the augmentations—*Revolution* is set 25 years before *Deus Ex*. Jensen is mechanically augmented (as opposed to the nanotechnology of the original), with a type of prosthetic enhancement that's nearly obsolete at the time of *Deus Ex*. That doesn't mean Jensen's augmentations (or "augs") are any less impressive: they're curvy, plastic, agile and capable of tremendous force. It explains why the combat is more physical, should you choose to engage in it, and makes the augs feel simultaneously retro and futuristic. In gameplay, your techniques are similar (hacking, impalement) to those you used in the original *Deus Ex*, but the technology is different.

With instant death melee attacks and all the usual guns, it might sound like you're a robot god. You're not. All this stuff, even just stabbing some dudes with your wrist blades, uses up energy. You have an upgradeable number of energy "pips," and the ones you use up don't regenerate. So you start each mission with a full stock, but if you use them all in an augmented frenzy in the first fight, you'll need to play very carefully until you find something to recharge them with.

It looks as if they've found a way to make stealth effective without making a mockery of the AI.

It's reassuring that there's plenty of room for indirect combat, too. It's not enough to have alternative ways of achieving your objective, as plenty of games since *Deus Ex* have: if we *can* shoot everyone, we *will* shoot everyone. My main fear was that *Human Revolution* would be primarily a shooter, with stealth, talking and hacking as occasional diversions along the way. It's not.

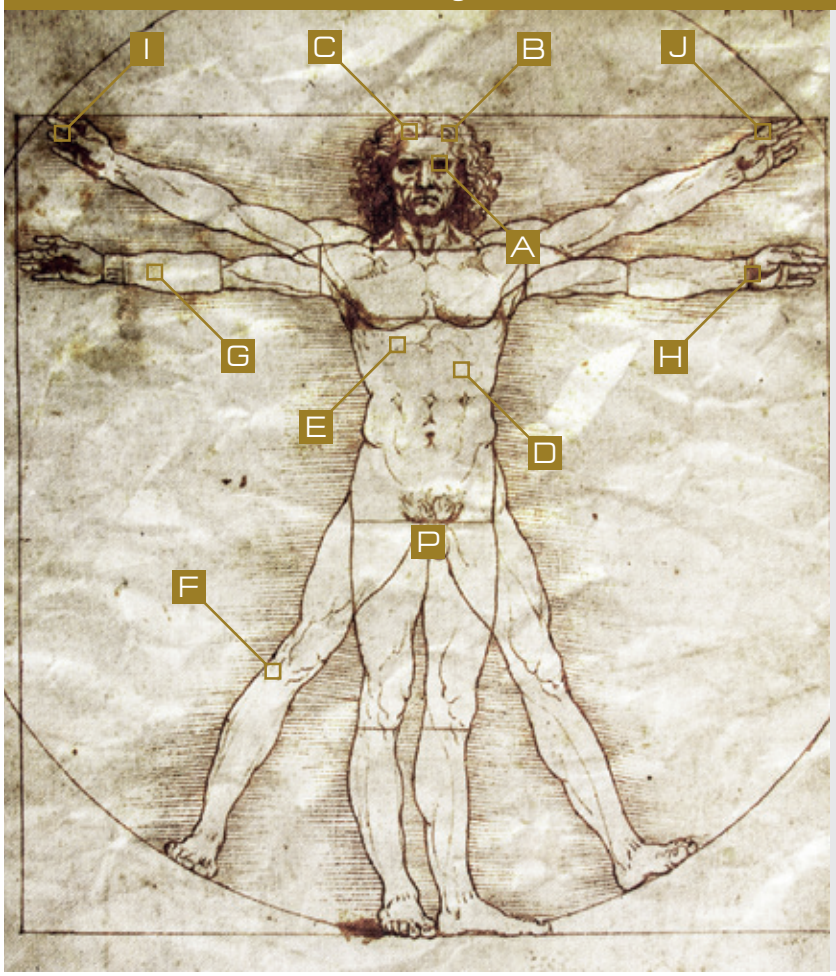
"We don't want it to be a run-and-shoot game," director Jean-Francois Dugas tells me. "If you try to run at the enemies...two, three, four bullets and you're dead." The lone concession to modern shooter conventions is that your health regenerates, but I can't honestly say that stockpiling medkits was my favorite part of *Deus Ex*.

If anything, surprisingly, *Human Revolution* is primarily a stealth game. Stealth works solely on line of sight (hiding in the shadows has no effect) because the team wants it to be as viable in brightly lit interiors as it is in a dark alleyway.

It's best explained by example. Snooping through the backrooms of a club to find a certain hacker (see "Tracing Tong"), Jensen comes to a T in the hallway. The cover key is pressed, and he hugs the left wall, switching the game to third-person mode. As well as letting you see what you're hiding behind, it lets you peek around the next corner without exposing yourself. A thug is coming. He stops, scratches an itch, and turns round. The cover key is released, switching us back to first person. Jensen strolls up to the thug and attacks. Back to third person, he taps the guard on the shoulder and cold-cocks him.

The whole sequence resembles a spy movie, for better or worse. Using a third-person view when you take cover absolutely works: it looks cool and is genuinely useful. In *Deus Ex*, you couldn't have known whether the guard in that corridor was

ANATOMY OF A CYBORG The augmentations we know about so far



A Enhanced Vision
You can see people through walls, and analyze structures for weak spots that you can smash through.

B Mind Reading
Details are still fuzzy on this one, but during key conversations, there's a social aug that can give you a better idea of which dialog line will work the best.

C Mind Control
Or you can unlock this more aggressive option that can force people to do what you want. They won't like you for it, though, and that has repercussions later.

D Cloak
Perfect invisibility to human enemies. We don't know yet whether this also works for bots and augs, or if that's a separate upgrade.

E Claymore System
Emits dozens of tiny bombs in all directions, killing everyone around you.

F Icarus Landing System
Lets you jump two or three meters, land from any height safely and silently and, if you hold the fire button while falling, slam into the ground, stunning nearby enemies.

G Strength
Initially it just lets you carry more, but it can be upgraded to let you lift heavier objects, throw them with lethal force, dampen weapon recoil and even punch through weak walls. If there's someone on the other side, all the better.

H Wrist Blades
Let you perform lethal takedowns at close range. The advantage of skewering people is that once they're dead, other guards can't wake them up.

I Hacking Module
Take control of electronic systems with a quick minigame, letting you open locked doors, control turrets and bots, and even set off an alarm in a remote area to distract the guards. It can be upgraded to make the minigame easier and give you more extensive control once you're in.

J Mysterious Splayed Hand
We've seen art of an aug that splays your fingers, bends them back and turns your wrist into a spinning axle. Will it blend? Or is it a personal fan for hot weather jobs?

facing you without leaning out, whereupon the guard would bark something ridiculous like "Thought I saw something...guy in a coat." Here it looks as if Eidos has found a way to make stealth effective without making a mockery of its AI.

Using third person for these "takedown" moves is harder to get used to. There are dozens of them, catering to both context and player choice. Nonlethal takedowns, triggered by tapping the button, involve swift martial arts. Lethal ones, triggered by holding it, are horrific eviscerations with your wrist blades—shocking to watch. Both are expertly animated, but my main concern with the transition between perspectives is that it might disconnect you from your character: you don't know which move he'll perform, you watch it from third person and you're not in control. What if a guard walks in?

Leonardo da Cyborg

I'm less worried about the setting. It's a more exotic future than you'd expect for 17 years from today, but it has substance, with a strong Renaissance style to the decor and clothing of some of the key characters. "The Renaissance was a period of scientific innovation and discovery," says writer Mary De Marle, "and you had a lot of resistance to it from the establishment. The great thinkers of the time pushed it forward."

It's as if they cored the Big Apple then sunk it into the sea.

The dev team sees a parallel between this and the advent of human cybernetic augmentation, which the story's humanitarian factions strongly oppose. It's a time of reinvention, a golden age for some, and a time when fearsome corporations rule the Earth.

"At first we tried to just coat [the Renaissance style] over everything," says art director Jonathan Jacques-Belletete, "and I'm not even going to show you what it looked like. But that's what iterations are for."

So most of the game is close to reality: a *Blade Runner* buzz of blaring neon, dense cities, dark streets and sparse, arty interiors. The biggest exception is an island city off the coast of Shanghai which, to put it simply, has a second floor. One of the global leaders in the cybernetics market took the entire thing over when they made their fortune, but the government wouldn't permit them to expand. So they built a new city on top of the old one, leaving it in perpetual gloom. In game, it's a hell of a thing to see: as if someone had cored the Big Apple and sunk it into the sea.

"Our seaport looks like just a seaport," Jacques-Belletete says, "but you turn your head and there's that crazy double-decker city right there. It's that juxtaposition we're doing all the time, and I think that's what cyberpunk is. The old is still there, but that crazy newness has just been wrapped over it."

I mention it because globe trotting is one of the great unsung pleasures of *Deus Ex*. From Hell's Kitchen to Hong Kong, it was never stunning to look at, but the fact that you *had* just flown from Hell's Kitchen to Hong Kong made the conspiracy feel global, and your job feel vital.

I'm impressed that Eidos not only picked up on this, but seems to understand *why* it

The Icarus Landing System lets you make a stunning entrance.

For some of the game, this is your ride from place to place.

Interiors are clean and bright, outside it's usually night.

You're not the only one with augmented bits.

This is one of the coolest guns I've ever wanted to avoid using.

Lethal takedowns are completely uncalled for, but also awesome.

Your pilot, Faridah Malik. I'll miss Jock, but not his face.

was a good thing. *Human Revolution*'s cities are fresh, glowing, bustling and huge.

"You can talk to everybody in the game" says producer David Anfossi. "And it's not, 'It's raining today'—we want to be sure they can support the world, give you more information about the city."

You're not a U.N. secret agent this time, but a security guard who had his arms blown off by augmented jerks. Someone was kind enough to give you cybernetic replacements, but that's all we know about the setup. Jensen, a man with more product in his hair than you'd expect from a revolutionary, does what I think we'd all do if we woke up with metal robot arms: buy a classy trenchcoat and head out to uncover some conspiracies.

Augmented reality

Other than the trenchcoat, the obvious thing Jensen and JC Denton have in common is augs. *Deus Ex* lets you tailor your agent with upgrades to his sneaking, shooting, hacking, strength and versatility. It worked, but the abilities were split awkwardly between RPG-style skills and power-up-style augs.

In *Human Revolution*, augmentations are mechanical replacements for bits of your body that you buy from a Limb Clinic whenever you have the cash. Your arms are already cybernetic, but there are 19 other augs that you can get installed in various parts of your body (see "Anatomy of a Cyborg"). Off the shelf they only come with basic functionality, such as lifting heavy objects with your robo-arms. After that, you spend experience points to unlock one of four or five other functions that aug is capable of. It's a metaphor for Jensen getting used to his enhancements and figuring out what they're good for. And it gives you more freedom than waiting until you stumble on the right aug canister, as you did in *Deus Ex*.

Jensen has the gravelliest voice to have come out of anything short of a Batman mask.

JC Denton's nano-augmentations, as well as his voice, make him a hard act to follow. He's one of the only game protagonists who can ask people questions and sound in charge without being a total jerk. There was no chance that Eidos could find a voice as good for Jensen. But what they have found—the gravelliest voice to come out of anything short of a Batman mask—actually works. It's a voice that's flat, serious, and simmering with menace when it needs to be.

"That's his real voice," says Steve Szczepkowski, audio director, of voice actor Elias Toufexis. "That's his natural tone. I didn't want a mimic of JC, but he needed to sound like he's from the same family."

Social interactions are one thing developers haven't managed to reduce to a few simple rules yet, but Eidos has nevertheless turned them into a game. When you're chatting to the locals or gathering information, you just pick an option and you're done. But for the important conversations, when this person might be the key to achieving your objective, you get into a verbal fight.

At each stage you're presented with options like "Insist," "Advise" and "Pinpoint," and each leads to a different line of dialog. You have to judge by the person's tone and words to determine if your approach is working. After some lengthy back and forth, your verbal sparring partner will either be convinced (success), unconvinced (try again) or so pissed off he'll never speak to you ever again. The branching of options is so intricate, Szczepkowski says that in dialog terms, it takes him "roughly six to eight hours" to create just one interaction.

Watching this in action is an unusual thing. Jensen's argument with a mobster was longer and far more heated than we've come to expect game dialog to be. Usually the only time someone talks for more than a few lines is when they're making a speech or spooling out exposition. In both cases, there's little emotion or interaction. Here, there's a real reaction from the mobster when he sees through Jensen's attempt to overplay his usefulness. And there's real tension for the player, knowing he can permanently screw this thing up.

If talking fails, there's always hacking to fall back on. Inevitably, it's a minigame, but quite a cool one, played on a map of the system's internal workings. Each network node you capture carries a chance of detection, and if that happens, you have to race to the computer's registry before the system's trace reaches you. But unlike *BioShock* or other hacking minigames, it's done in real-time—you can't use hacking to escape the tension of combat.

TRACING TONG Clues to returning *Deus Ex* characters

Human Revolution is set in 2027, two years before *Deus Ex* hero JC Denton is born. But there's already evidence that it may feature familiar faces. In the demonstration I saw, the player was tracking down a hacker named Tong. He's not the *Deus Ex* conspiracy nut we know, but if I told you how I know that, it would spoil a minor plot twist. Eidos didn't ask anyone not to talk about it, so if you're plot-sensitive you may want to stay away from other previews.

The character's full name sounds like "Tong Se Hong." Chinese names put the family name first, so this guy—an aggressive, corrupt gangster—is probably related to Tracer Tong. In both previous *Deus Ex* games, Tracer was strongly anti-technology. This guy seems to be on the pro-augmentation side of the social schism. That, and his association with unsavory elements, may end up causing Tracer Tong's prejudice against technology.

I asked producer David Anfossi if any characters from *Deus Ex* would be returning in person. "No." But then, confusingly, he said they may have "cameos." I tried to get a straighter answer from audio director Steve Szczepkowski by pretending I already knew. Would the returning characters have the same voice actors? "You'll know a couple of the people...We got the actors from the first game to come back and reprise their roles." Score.

Crate expectations

What I've seen of *Human Revolution* certainly preserves the multiple routes that *Deus Ex* always provided. I got a geeky little thrill the first time Jensen picked up a crate. You can move stuff! You can even use the stuff you've moved in conjunction with the cover system to do fancy commando rolls from impromptu cover points. You can pick up bodies (living or dead) and toss them out of the way. If they're only unconscious, roaming guards can wake them up and go hunting for you. These are modest gameplay additions, but valuable reassurance that the new *Deus Ex* isn't forgoing the open-area nuance and problem solving of its predecessor.

It feels very strange to be this excited about a new *Deus Ex* game. It takes a while to realize that the third-person cover system isn't actually a betrayal of *Deus Ex*'s combat, but rather a very modern way of depicting it. It may bother you—I'm not saying it won't. But as *Deus Ex* itself proves, a great game can endure a few weird quirks. And when I try to think of something fundamental I love about *Deus Ex* that isn't in *Human Revolution*, other than JC Denton himself, I struggle. Any number of things could go wrong from here, but I never thought I'd come away from it this optimistic. ■

HONOR VS. DUTY

Two old soldiers—**CALL OF DUTY** and **MEDAL OF HONOR**—square off. Only one can win *by Rich McCormick and Leon Hurley*

Change is coming. Since 2003, *Call of Duty* has become an annual fixture to millions of eager fans. Like clockwork, this year will see the launch of the seventh iteration, *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, on November 9. Most games have fled in the series' conquering path, beating a retreat back to the safer bulwarks of January and later.

But 2010 is different. This year *Medal of Honor*, a pre-emptive strike by EA, will be landing squarely in *CoD* territory in mid-October, with the intention of dislodging the world's biggest shooter franchise from its fortified bunker.

Both games are a marked departure from their predecessors. *Medal of Honor* was last spotted in 2007, with the bombed-out townships of Nazi-occupied Europe its backdrop. Now, three years after it was struck off the active combat register, *MoH* has returned, slamming the mess hall door open, chomping on a cigar labeled "modern realism!" It's a two-team effort: EA LA has recruited one of the best shooter developers in the business—DICE, creators of *Battlefield*—to craft a multiplayer segment that provides backup for EA's single-player component.

CoD, meanwhile, has also seen a changing of the guard. With Treyarch (rather than Infinity Ward) in command of *CoD*, it won't be another *Modern Warfare*, but don't expect a return to World War II, either. *Black Ops*, instead, takes the series to a period virtually unexplored in gaming: the quiet battles of the Cold War. Expect a globe-trotting campaign that drops the player in the hotspots of a less-than-swinging '60s.

We've put together everything there is to know about these two massive war games—two games with powerful lineages, two games that are moving to new climes, two games that each aim to create the best damn shooter that ever went to war.

MEDAL OF HONOR

EA's challenger reboots with a salute to the realities of war

Greg Goodrich, executive producer of the reinvigorated *Medal of Honor*, rides a little toy scooter around his office. This could conjure up images of the rebooted *MoH* as a sillier take on contemporary combat. This image is wrong.

"Our intent is to honor those who serve in a respectful manner. The only thing we're focusing on are the men and women who are at war, who give everything and deserve our support," he says. Goodrich is very clear about the game's serious approach to warfare. How to interpret that approach into a game is the subsequent problem: The average soldier's experience is 95 percent screaming boredom married with five percent terrifying life-and-death battle. Take *MoH* away from the typical bombast of a first-person shooter and you dull its sharp edge against its clear competitor: *Call of Duty*. How will EA juggle the warheads of excitement and realism?

"The new *Medal of Honor* definitely has a 'war movie' feel to it. Our story is about a group of soldiers and what they encounter during the course of a battle." Rather than a watered-down, non-specific "Middle East" location, *MoH* has planted its flag in Afghanistan, a place news reports paint as uniformly bleak. Goodrich says the media isn't telling us the whole story about the region: "The country itself is a very diverse place. Players will expect dry, barren and arid locations, and while they exist, it's important to remember there are lush green river valleys, snowy mountain peaks and diverse cities filled with strange composition and irregular construction."

Details on the game's conflict itself are scarce, although it's easy to assume a level of relevance with operations in that area of the world. We're told that players will be working in groups, with AI soldiers providing battlefield context (with the possibility of cooperative play remaining unconfirmed), and that players running through the campaign mode will also be a part of a pool of playable people, three of which have been identified so far.

Tiers for fears

News of the game's launch was accompanied by meetings with active "Tier 1 Operatives," guys like the bearded warfighter depicted on the game's boxart. These lethal dudes, addressed only by their nebulous call signs and so ultimo-secret in the military that they wore balaclavas, went to great lengths to clarify their role in conflict: surgical implements to complete incredibly delicate jobs. For some of the missions in this game, you'll be one of them.

It's their probably very sandy shoes you'll be wearing on jobs such as the assault on an Afghan ridge base that we saw in EA's demo. High on the mountainside, a squad breaks between cover, avoiding cliffside patrols to get into the heart of the hideout. This deep in the enemy's home turf, typical shock-and-awe tactics will get you killed. Instead, Goodrich wants *MoH* players to follow a doctrine of "quiet action," using speed and surprise to drop foes.

On the Afghan mountain, the commando band arranges themselves silently around their quarry, picking spots and targets before quickly and cleanly dispatching them with controlled pops of gunfire.

Goodrich explains why the game is looking quite so closely at these badasses: "*Medal of Honor* is unique in that it reveals the mission of today's most elite American soldier—his mindset and his uncompromising professionalism—the Tier 1 Operator. And since we've had the benefit and unprecedented access to this community, we've focused our common thread primarily on them."

Average (GI) Joes

But to claim that the existence of these elite combatants is the norm in military conflicts is disingenuous, and with Goodrich consistent in his stated aim of presenting a realistic vision of war, players will also take up the mantle of at least two more typical (but also fully capable) fighters. Confirmed so far are an Army Ranger and an Apache helicopter gunner—both epitomize the other side of the U.S. military's war coin: the explosive front-door entrances.

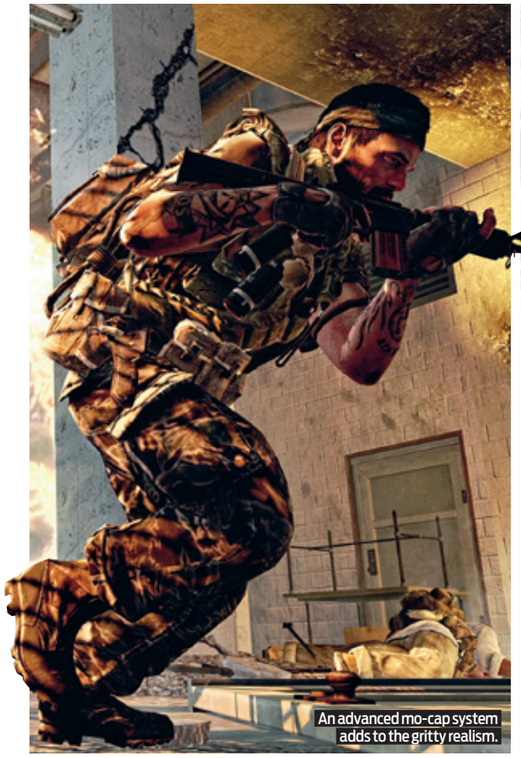
It doesn't get much more explosive than an AH-64 Apache helicopter gunship. Players will take the gun of one of these air-monsters, but video also shows a cockpit view; whether this is under player control or a simple cutscene is yet to be hammered down, but Goodrich drops a few other vehicular hints. "There are ATVs, helicopters and other 'assets' to employ," he says.

With trailers suggesting that lightly brushing a stone is enough to make it explode with screen-shaking force, can we expect to see an implementation of realistic explosive damage, a la *Battlefield: Bad Company 2*?

In the main campaign, no. Goodrich and his team want to keep the core of *MoH* controlled. As tempting as destructive tech might be, the concern is that chucking it into a single-player Unreal engine 3-powered action-gauntlet could compromise the respectful and narrative-led approach.

But, and this is a biggie, all of that justification is out the window for the multiplayer. There, DICE and the building-toppling Frostbite engine have been conscripted in what Goodrich calls the "chocolate and peanut butter approach." EA LA is free to tighten the bootstraps of a coherent campaign, while one of the world's leading authorities on multi-person shoot-fests gets to play with another massive series.

But it's back to gritty simplicity, the concept of making a great shooter, that *Medal of Honor* will need to go with in this latest installment. Previous *MoH*s have ramped up the gimmicks in order to bring the freshness back, but the gun-elephant in the room—the sales record-smashing *CoD* series—did its best work simply by making the "art" of shooting visceral and kinetic. Goodrich and his team, to their game's betterment, are all too aware of this: "The core experience of any shooter is drawing a gun, aiming at the enemy and then letting the air out of them. We've spent a lot of time on the 'through the gun' experience. This is the absolute heart of any shooter. You get it wrong, and nothing else matters." ■


An advanced mo-cap system adds to the gritty realism.

Exploding crossbow arrows should grace *all* games.

The '60s wasn't all drugs and rock 'n' roll.

CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS

The reigning champ's game plan: heat up the Cold War

Let's start by cutting through the rumors: this is not *Call of Duty: Vietnam*. Yes, a big chunk of it takes place during America's most regretted war, but it's not the only setting. Instead, the plot spans the Cold War, a period of tension and conflict that lasted almost 40 years. According to studio head Mark Lamia, it'll focus on the "hottest points," placing it mainly in the late 1960s.

It's Ben Stiller in Tropic Thunder, isn't it?

After years of being the B-team, it's looking like developer Treyarch is ready to step up and take center stage. The console-only *CoD3* was good, but relied more on blowing stuff up than careful character progression and pacing. *CoD: World at War* visibly creaked under the pressure of trying to make ye olde World War II feel interesting for yet another spin. Meanwhile, series creator Infinity Ward's *Modern Warfare 2* was a virtually unconnected series of cool ideas and explosions glued together with globs of stupid plot.

With Infinity Ward now one blip away from flatlining (due to a mass exodus resulting from Activison's firing of the studio heads) this is Treyarch's chance to shine. What I was shown of *Black Ops* featured a whole heap of stuff blowing up, but it also flashed a titillating glimpse of clever ideas that suggest Treyarch has matured since *World at War* asked me whether I'd like to shoot the unarmed POWs or just set them on fire.

SOP for SOG

Only one character has been revealed so far: a Studies and Observations Group (SOG) operative called Mason. (Odds of surviving the campaign: 10 to one.) Treyarch has chosen the SOG because, as an early multi-discipline special operations division, it has a long history of deniable ops and non-standard gear.

Despite the heavy 'Nam emphasis, the first mission I'm shown takes place in the Soviet Ural mountains. It begins with Mason aboard a reconnaissance jet, decked out in the bright-orange space suits needed to prevent you from popping like a balloon at near-orbital altitudes. Using a grainy monochrome monitor on the jet, the mission is to direct the team on the ground, guiding them to hiding places as you locate enemy patrols. The flickery screen and radio chatter are *just a little bit* reminiscent of *CoD4*'s famous AC-130 mission.

This is what *Black Ops* plans to do to *Medal of Honor*.

Flying an attack helicopter = extreme awesomeness.

The action then switches to the team in the snow below, and it's clear that the engine's had a big overhaul. *Modern Warfare 2*'s tech was starting to look a little creaky round the edges; here there's a crisp richness to the detail and sense of scale that freshens everything up. In the Russian mission, it means big, open, mountainous levels that roll into the distance, while the Vietnam levels are full of dense, steamy jungle.

Things start gently, moving through the forest, avoiding some guards and dropping others with a silent, high-powered crossbow. There are some lovely little details, such as the hissing rustle of anorak coats as you crawl past patrols. But the real fun is when it all kicks off.

The general shooting, as the SOG team fights through a series of Soviet military installations, has a nice level of variety that manages to keep things interesting without feeling too gimmicky. A few snowy shoot-outs lead to some rappelling, which in turn sees you pushing off from a window in slo-mo and shooting the glass so that it fills with cracks and shatters as you swing off of it. Then there are the exploding arrows. It's probably pushing the authenticity a bit, but nothing comes close to sticking a bolt with a flashing light on the end into someone and then waiting for the fleshy explosion.

The real showstopper, though, is the misfired enemy RPG that sets off an avalanche, leading to a last-minute escape from the collapsing mountain by base-jumping from a cliff edge. It's a gloriously over-the-top climax—signature *Call of Duty*.

Chopper shocker

The Vietnam levels pack in a similar mix of gung-ho pyrotechnics and surprises, such as a mission that starts with your helicopter crashing into the Huang River. Initially, there's a panicked scramble inside the chopper as it fills with water. But that's soon interrupted by the Vietcong appearing at the canopy and murderizing the pilot in his seat.

After the violence of the crash and ambush, the sudden silence as you become submerged is an atmospheric surprise, with chasing gunfire leaving fizzing bubble trails all around you. It's a shame that jumping up behind a canoe to take a human shield spoils it all by snapping the camera to the last bullet and following it into the face of a soldier. It's a wincingly cheesy touch that breaks the spell, almost undoing the otherwise blistering opener.

Throughout the 'Nam levels, the influences are clear: Your companion has a headband similar to De Niro's *Deer Hunter* character; a rush attack through buildings mirrors *Full Metal Jacket;* and a twitchy, torch-led exploration of a tunnel complex screams *Platoon*.

One surprising aspect is that, while this is technically an old setting, it feels new, mainly because the weapons and gear are so familiar. Military tech moves fairly slowly, so the guns and vehicles that are basically fresh out of the wrapper in *Black Ops*' time period are well-worn favorites in most games. It actually lets this installment enjoy the best of both worlds—namely, an explosive insta-death arsenal of guns mixed with a wealth of cool historical and cinematic references.

So a loud, urban street-fight as you rattle from alley to alley—using a radio to call in twin minigun-touting Hueys to obliterate buildings and tanks—feels like the best bits of *Modern Warfare 2*, but offset by the neon shop signs and badly wired telegraph poles of an Asian market street. The highlight, however, has to be an escape that sees Mason break out of a POW camp in a stolen Hind. The subsequent flight—fully under your control, as opposed to an on-rails section—sees you blasting trucks from the road and enemy birds from the sky. It shows off that engine again, creating a large, verdant valley for you to buzz around in.

The rest, though, is just made up of infuriating hints from Treyarch. A separate co-op story was teased, and there was the insinuation that dedicated servers would be back. They talked of a whole QA team devoted just to playing multiplayer in order to root out glitches. There was even mention of some sort of "social aspect," and the implication that there would be opportunities for players to interact in-game without actually playing.

The important thing is that Treyarch has shown off enough to suggest there's more to the *CoD* series than Infinity Ward's smoldering ruins, or *Modern Warfare*. From what I've seen, the change of setting, combined with a well-blended mix of atmosphere and pace, could be just enough to kick-start the series into a new era. ■

Step into the super-sneaky stealth shoes of agent Michael Thorton.

Need to know

What is it?
Third-person action RPG set in the intriguing world of international espionage

Influenced by
KotOR; big, evil corporations

Play it on
Dual core CPU, 2GB RAM, Radeon 4850

Alternatively
Splinter Cell: Conviction, 87%

Copy protection
Online activation; up to five installs active at once

YESPIONAGE

Are you Bauer, Bond, or Bourne? With **ALPHA PROTOCOL**'s inclusive story, you certainly won't be bored ***by Rich McCormick***

The most effective real-world spies are completely average-looking. They're not too tall, not too handsome and do everything they can to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Maybe that's what Obsidian was going for by calling its spy RPG *Alpha Protocol*—with a name that bland, an audience coming straight from the flashiness of *Splinter Cell: Conviction* might never see it coming. Hopefully they're reading this review, though, because otherwise they might miss a deep and engaging espionage thriller.

This is a role-playing game resolutely tied to its system of numbers, statistics and perks. Against the quick-fire combat of Sam Fisher's deniable adventures, the action side of *Alpha Protocol* is clunky; but when married so closely to hard numbers and dialogue choices, Obsidian's adventure becomes a tense, subtle and well-crafted story.

Stepping into the super-sneaky stealth shoes of agent Michael Thorton, I was tasked with escaping from the facilities of my new employers, *Alpha Protocol*, as a test of my skill. AP's expertise is handling the U.S. government's dirty work—as a group, they're totally deniable.

Once acquainted with the team, it's off to Saudi Arabia for Thorton's first real assignment. With a jumbo jet swatted from the sky by American-made missiles (apparently pilfered by terrorist group Al-Samad), *Alpha Protocol* sails close to the wind of believable modern topics. Big business is firmly in the game's sniper scope—fictional hyper-corporation Halbech, the defense contractor that manufactured the plane-wrecking rockets, is a constant in Thorton's quests. Similarities to real-world companies like Halliburton are obviously no coincidence (very mild, unshocking spoiler warning!), and Halbech's influence throughout the world is less than benign.

If you approach the game as a pure shooter, *Alpha Protocol* feels simplistic. Weapons have their own quirks: if you hold your reticule steady over a target with your pistol for a few seconds, you'll produce a critical hit. Do the same with a shotgun, and you'll fire buckshot blasts that knock enemies on their backs. The problem is that the mechanics can't shake that RPG feeling, and it never really feels like a shooter. It's all too easy to mentally superimpose little numbers ticking away over your foe's heads.

Equip your bifocals

Considering that the game takes pains to introduce your Thorton as a prodigy, it's confusing to work out quite why his myopia wasn't diagnosed correctly on his company physical. My Mike was a pistol specialist, having deliberately ramped up his shooting hand to off targets quickly. Great at 15 feet, where a headshot means goodnight goon, but beyond that, he has the aim of a standard Bond henchman.

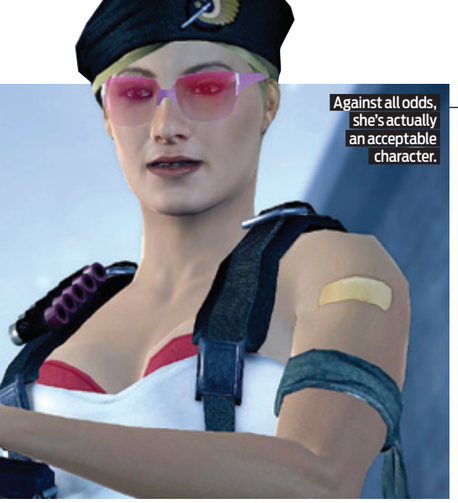
There is some comfort to the floaty combat: an impressive weapon customization system will let you upgrade guns and armor. Sidearms have four slots in which to cram technology—either bought from the Clearinghouse black market or nabbed on-mission—and these make a notable difference to a weapon's handling. Body armor can be purchased and then lined with various gadgets, boosts or armor plates—want to be the spy world's Rambo?

You can purchase clanky soldier armor and stuff it full of ceramic pads for extra protection, but you'll be less quiet when creeping around. I went a different route, buying a silencer for my handgun early on, and combining it with futuristic stealth armor that muffled any loud movements. Theoretically, I had no protection

Can you find the words?

Mike sees a word search like this when he hacks a computer

E	S	P	I	O	N	A	G	E	A	T	3	A	L	P	H	A
R	N	X	4	Z	3	K	Q	H	4	0	4	A	I	2	8	P
B	P	C	G	I	S	A	W	E	S	O	M	E	3	F	C	8
9	R	Z	1	B	E	T	R	A	Y	7	E	F	N	O	G	9
4	O	X	3	K	K	S	X	D	8	J	A	W	O	O	W	J
M	T	I	3	R	M	T	X	S	P	I	E	S	T	B	L	I
Y	O	A	7	A	D	N	O	H	O	9	J	G	N	K	R	I
X	C	H	F	1	9	E	R	O	P	K	E	X	R	S	V	U
G	O	5	6	J	1	G	X	T	H	N	P	X	O	N	G	J
1	L	A	6	F	D	R	A	E	B	E	M	O	S	E	W	A


Against all odds, she's actually an acceptable character.

"No, Derrick, you point the *little* end of the gun at the guy you want to shoot."

Mike doesn't hit women. He karate chops them.

Cover is rudimentary, but works.

"I think I stepped in something. Can you check the bottom of my shoe?"

Tazed. The outcome of a bad dialogue choice.

against gunned-up guards who spotted me; in practice, my gameplan meant they never would.

Thorton's background is selectable, the choice between soldier, spy or techie informing how far you can progress in certain skills. I had my action points pre-spent on the skills that'd assist in my chosen approach, filling the stealth and close-combat areas of Thorton's character sheet.

Party piece

Thorton also has a radial menu of active skills that he can deploy in the field. Combine a few powerful ones, and you feel like the badass that an international man of mystery should be. My absolute favorite ability, which you get from dumping piles of action points into your pistol skill, is the "chain shot." It slows time to a crawl to allow me to line up a series of accurate shots. Once the timer ticks down to zero, Thorton fires, dropping an entire room of goons in a heartbeat. Used sparingly, it's a moment that leaves you clapping for more. Lean on it (or other powerful skills) too heavily, though, and it's worryingly easy to get into game-breaking territory. I wrangled the game to let me off some of the beefier bosses before they'd even finished their taunts, turning invisible before walking up to them and plugging them in the head.

These bosses are a confused presence in *Alpha Protocol*. The game quickly splits into three locales—Rome, Taipei and Moscow—and they feel like they've been developed by three separate teams. Rome is all grey-haired men and believable targets, while Moscow has surprise appearances by mafia men who've wandered off-set from *Metal Gear Solid*. Trying to square a tense, low-key cafe discussion in a Roman cafe with a break-in at a tracksuit-wearing, coke-snorting superhuman disco fan's neon mansion in Moscow is tough, given the general gravitas of the central plot with its themes of patriotism and betrayal.

A few characters came close to breaking the game's spell, but the central cast is quite strong. *Alpha Protocol*'s operatives, double-agents and mercenaries present unique fronts. Thorton keeps dossiers on each—repositories of incidental information about their background, but also handy tips to keeping them on-side. Knowing whether a contact likes you to engage them with a direct offer or banter first usually elicits a better response than pissing them off; on the other hand, the game goes to great lengths to suggest that you deliberately stay on the bad side of some of those you run into and to approach missions in a different way.

That's the look

Which one broke into your house, madam?

The spies of life

This choice is *Alpha Protocol*'s core strength. Several missions offer you two black-and-white options and make you live with the consequences. Dialogue choices, too, kick you down different paths, invisible game voodoo closing off and opening further options as you either tell a counter-agent how you're going to kill him or join his side.

Conversational options sometimes feel unexplained or hurried (there's a small time limit attached to each decision)—one-word descriptions like "suave" are not enough to plot what your Thorton will say. But at least tense dialogue standoffs give you blunter descriptions: The consequence of selecting the "Execute" option is not hard to predict.

The way you approach a mission affects your standing in other areas: I kept a low, nonlethal profile for most of the game, killing only three people before reaching the final mission. (Reminiscent of Obsidian's previous work on *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II*, the finale is rushed, forcing you to face waves of baddies who can magically spot you.) Setting up shop in a new safehouse, I was met by many contacts, each of whom referenced my awesome stealth skills. By telling you that the region's superspy only noted you'd turned up on his turf after you presented yourself to him, the game makes you feel like an actual espionage pro. Of course, go in guns blazing and you'll be spotted, your conversations changing accordingly.

Either way, you're left with dirty hands at the end of the game. The choices Mike's forced to make aren't plotted against any kind of good/evil scale, and there's no real way to "ace" the game: any way you slice it, people get hurt, things explode, bad stuff goes down. A news report plays over the final credits, detailing the public's-eye-view of the events you've been involved in, piecing together the outside perspective and showing your actions—however noble in your eyes—as seen by the wider world.

A playthrough of *Alpha Protocol* is an intensely personal thing, implicating you in believable events that take their cue from current issues and poking away until you confide what you'd do in that situation. Even with clunky gunplay and an artistic blandness, *Alpha Protocol*'s spy simulator envelops the player in a story that feels entirely of their own creation, and is all the more compelling for it. ■

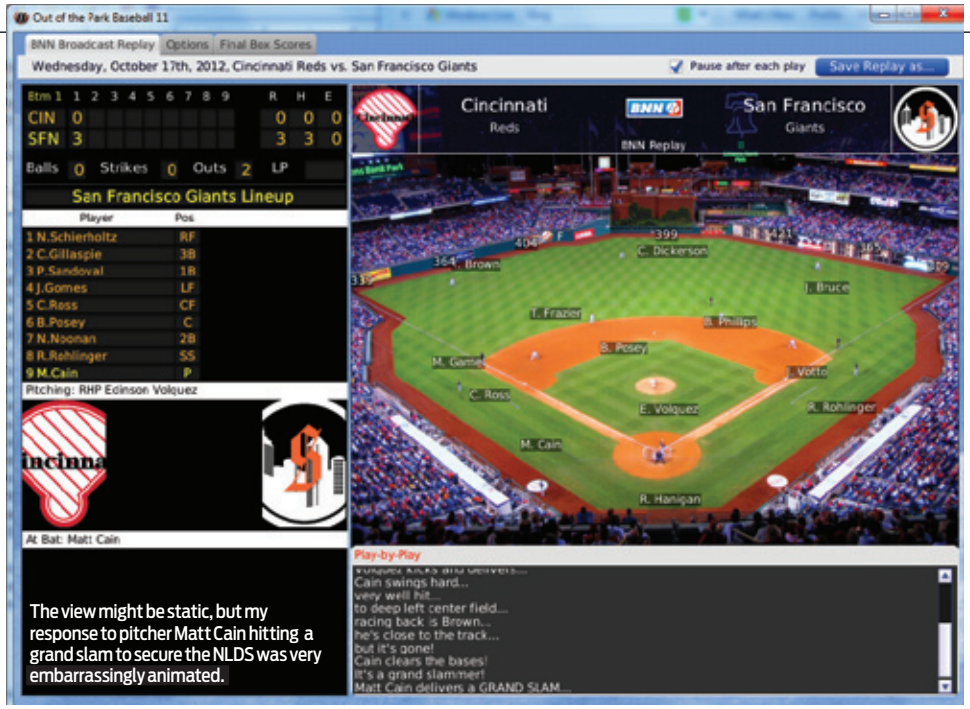
Any way you slice it, people get hurt, things explode, bad stuff goes down.

VERDICT

The combat and final mission are weak, but the story strands that bind it all together are excitingly unique to each player.

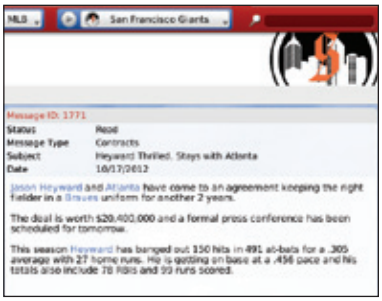
PC GAMER **81**

◆ **Price** $50 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Sega ◆ **Developer** Obsidian ◆ **Multiplayer** None
◆ **Link** alphaprotocol.com ◆ **ESRB** M



The view might be static, but my response to pitcher Matt Cain hitting a grand slam to secure the NLDS was very embarrassingly animated.

OOTP lets you manage on the most micro of micro levels within your chosen organization.


I'd be thrilled, too, if I just signed a two-year, $20 million contract.

BOX SCORE

OUT OF THE PARK BASEBALL 11's fields of data will entrance hardcore baseball stats fans ***by Rob Smith***

Need to know

What is it?
A spreadsheet- and text-format re-creation of the front office brains behind a MLB franchise

Influenced by:
Football Manager

Play it on:
2GHz CPU, 2GB RAM, 1GB HD

Alternatively:
MLB 2K10 (78%)

Copy protection:
Key code/disc check

Check out:
Online multiplayer leagues
ootpdevelopments.com/board

If Michael Lewis' book *Moneyball* sits dog-eared on your bookshelf, then you probably already know about the *Out of the Park Baseball* sim series. If you bookmark sites like *Baseball Almanac* and *Baseball Reference*, then *OOTP 11* is a no-doubt, walk-off home run no-brainer to become a part of your game collection. For newcomers, this *is* your dad's baseball game. And if you *are* that dad, or fondly recall memories of times at the ballpark with a scorecard on your lap, then the deep, involved world of general managing your favorite franchise can end up sucking hours upon hours of involved strategizing over the diamond, the payroll, the drafts, the waiver wire and the DL.

From small acorns...

Since its small-scale launch in 1999, *Out of the Park* has consistently evolved its stats-based baseball gameplay. Remember, you never actually see a pitch thrown in anger. You never witness first-hand the sweet swing that sends a game-winner over the fence (though you can see the ball moving across the static field if you're watching pitch-by-pitch). But you feel the impact of each situation.

Most players will take charge of their favorite Major League franchise, but you can work the minors, generate true fantasy-style settings and pretty much pick exactly how you want your baseball world to look and feel. The breadth of options is pretty amazing, and the usability of most of the myriad menus could teach Microsoft a few lessons. Everything feels within reach and accessible. Complex operations like finding out what players an AI GM might want in a trade is a one-click maneuver; comparison charts are easily accessible if you want to find out if the potential of the AAA pitcher you're scouting eclipses the current potential of a veteran you could move. (Established real-world players follow statistical averages, so it's the process of scouting and recruiting minor league gems that proves to be most rewarding for virtual managers.) Oh, the choices. If that kind of decision-making sends you to sleep, you didn't read this far anyway. If you're still here, then know that *OOTP 11* refines the vast array of options found in previous games.

Geeks like us

Competing against a computer-powered stats engine can be compelling, but proving your wiles against other amateur GMs is huge, and *OOTP*'s online league options provide tons of opportunity. Most communities are intense, serious and committed—a boon to the hardcore and worth avoiding if you're a casual GM. So if you think you've got the chops to beat the Cashmans and Sabeans at their seven-figure salary games, this is how you prove it. ■

◆ **Price** $40 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Out of the Park Developments ◆ **Developer** Out of the Park Developments/VivaMedia ◆ **Multiplayer** 32 players ◆ **Link** ootpdevelopments.com ◆ **ESRB** NA

VERDICT

A graphically bland, but ultimately satisfying re-creation of the front office number-crunching in the halls of MLB's finest.

PC GAMER **86**

REDEPLOYED

In **ARMA 2: OPERATION ARROWHEAD**, you can kill a man from a kilometer away...at 15 frames per second ***by Evan Lahti***

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★

Need to know

What is it?
A stand-alone expansion to the best military simulator anywhere

Influenced by
Operation Flashpoint, Generation Kill

Play it on
2.4 GHz quad-core CPU, 4GB RAM, GeForce 280/ Radeon 4870

Alternatively
Battlefield: Bad Company 2 (81%)

Copy protection
Online activation

Check out
The best *Arma 2* mods at Armaholic.com

My ribs are in the sand. My eyes are pressed into an infrared scope. A Blackhawk helicopter thunders overhead, a pinwheeling silhouette against the sun. It's taking small arms fire—I can hear the pangs of bullets striking the Blackhawk's belly.

And then, a lucky shot pegs the pilot through the canopy. A green tracer streak hangs in the air, evidence of the bullet's trajectory—the chopper swerves, dead on the throttle, into the dust. A random rifleman with a simple AK-74 just took a multi-million-dollar piece of steel out of the sky through sheer luck. Anything can happen in *ArmA 2*'s unscripted, high-fidelity war playground. At its best, it's an engine for combat anecdotes like these—a box of real military equipment that operates with uncompromising authenticity, driven by your actions.

Operation Arrowhead simply adds more toys and tech to that sandbox: infrared optics, unmanned aerial drones, detachable backpacks, a heap of new firearms and vehicles, and a 230-square-kilometer, Afghanistan-like desert theater called Takistan to deploy them in.

At-takistan!

The seven-mission campaign is a short but straightforward tour of *OA*'s new content. You transition between three army roles: securing an airport as a Delta Force operator, smothering infantry with cannon fire as a Bradley armored vehicle commander and knocking out convoys as an Apache combat chopper pilot. But the best missions will come from *ArmA 2*'s vast modding community. *OA* includes *ArmA 2*'s mission editor tool, a blank slate for the wildest 150-plane dogfight, convoy ambush or sabotage skirmish you can think of. I made a mission where women in jogging suits, aided by a helicopter gunship, had to protect four cows from an all-out land assault by rocket-wielding insurgents. Online co-op is still far and away the best venue for these imaginative army escapades.

The new combat systems and weapons are technically impressive. Using an unmanned drone to launch a missile right into a terrorist's doorway from six kilometers away perfectly captures the thrill of coordination and execution. Eyeing an enemy patrol through an infrared sniper rifle makes you feel more like a modern warrior than *Modern Warfare 2*'s Hollywood scenes.

But a reinforcement of content isn't what *ArmA 2* needed most. It's still a game whose technology is out of step with its massive scope. Larger firefights in urban areas can dip the framerate to single digits, even on the record-breaking $7,000 PC we reviewed on page 91. Friendly AI is a mindless mess when it comes to pathfinding (especially in vehicles), sometimes taking minutes to reach waypoints that are steps away.

Mission incomplete

A few of the new additions are incomplete, too. "Dialing in" your scope, for example, lets you adjust your aim on a long-range gun, but there's no animation associated with doing so—a number value simply changes on the screen. And the potentially exciting Scud missile launchers don't actually *attack* anything, they just launch their missiles straight up, apparently into orbit. Take that, ET.

These issues haunt the experience, but the bigger deterrent to newcomers will be *ArmA 2*'s insatiable, buggy engine. You get the impression that Bohemia has released this expansion with the expectation that the *ArmA 2* modding community will complete it. It will, of course.

Arrowhead's flaws are a byproduct of its massive ambition. Though they let some of the air out of the simulation, the unscripted, anything-can-happen warfare still makes *Operation Arrowhead* a ticket to one of the most unique, satisfying and immersive shooters on our platform. ■

I made a mission where women in jogging suits, aided by a helicopter gunship, had to protect four cows.

Arms Race

A quick ranking of our favorite *ArmA 2* equipment

DEADLINESS

Golden Revolver
Preferred sidearm of Takistani generals. Glimmers in daylight.

M32 Grenade Launcher
Handheld artillery.

MK16 ELGM TWS
Thermal optics, attached grenade launcher. Killer.

M2A3 Bradley
Pure versatility. Cannons. Thermal vision. AT missiles.

◆ **Price** $40 ◆ **Release** June29 ◆ **Publisher** Meridian4 ◆ **Developer** Bohemia Interactive
◆ **Multiplayer** 50 players, co-op or versus ◆ **Link** arma2.com/arrowhead ◆ **ESRB** M

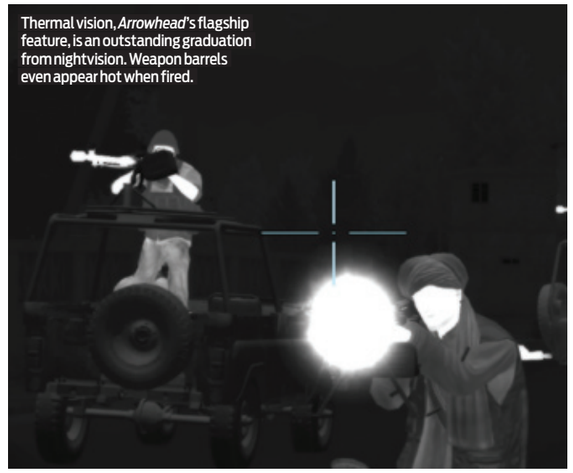
VERDICT

Thermal optics and other combat toys make *Operation Arrowhead* the most realistic wargame sim available today.

PC GAMER 82

Whatever your nationality, it's natural to brag about the gun rack on your pickup.

There are eight variants of the MK 16 rifle alone.



Thermal vision, *Arrowhead*'s flagship feature, is an outstanding graduation from nightvision. Weapon barrels even appear hot when fired.

What goes up doesn't necessarily come down.

Tap Q or E while prone, and you'll spin on your belly to dodge enemy fire. Do a barrel roll!

COPY RIGHT

It's time for the THE MISADVENTURES OF P.B. WINTERBOTTOM *by Craig Pearson*

I hate what time-meddling games do to me. Afterwards, for every real-world problem I encounter, I expect to be able to slow things down, rewind and undo, or using *Winterbottom*'s core device, create clones to solve it. I'm not writing this, by the way. Craig #3 is.

Craig #2 here. *Winterbottom* is a devilishly tricky puzzle-platformer, set in a gorgeous silent movie world where you're helping a thief steal time pies. The pies pop up at various points in the levels, unobtainable via conventional platforming. Winterbottom's cloning ability creates a copy of the odious little pie-thief, who'll repeat whatever action you were performing at the time. You can boost yourself up on a pile of clones; leave one whacking away at a switch; or one could be on the other end of a see-saw.

Things are getting complicated. Craig #1 will take over while I take screenshots. Yeah, so I just set a clone of Winterbottom whacking away on one side of a jump and stood on the other. I created a second clone and tossed it toward the whacking clone. We sent this copy to and fro, collecting the pies dangling over the drop. They were only collectible in sequence, so it took a good deal of clone-whacking to finish.

Good job, Craig #1. Original and best Craig here: *PB Winterbottom* is a clever puzzle game, and it gets a lot of mileage out of its one idea. The puzzles are never too obtuse, and never a cakewalk. It's cheap, witty and will give you that smug glow of satisfaction when each brilliant solution pops into your head. ■

PC GAMER **80**

Who hasn't wanted to beat their clone with an umbrella?

Collect time pies to complete the levels.

◆ **Price** $5 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** 2k Play ◆ **Developer** The Odd Gentlemen ◆ **Multiplayer** none ◆ **Link** winterbottomgame.com ◆ **ESRB** E

ALAS, POOR LOGIC

Never mind clever ideas, HAMLET, how it plays is the thing *by Richard Cobbett*

Properly laid out, a puzzle might be frustrating, but at heart you know it's your inadequacy keeping you from the solution. Done poorly, it quickly goes beyond frustrating to actively annoying, especially when the solution turns out to be something as smug as a password being "password."

Needless to say, point-and-click *Hamlet* does that. It also has a puzzle where you have to cut free an explosive mine using an imaginary crab. Then it gets silly. Oddly though, it doesn't become funny.

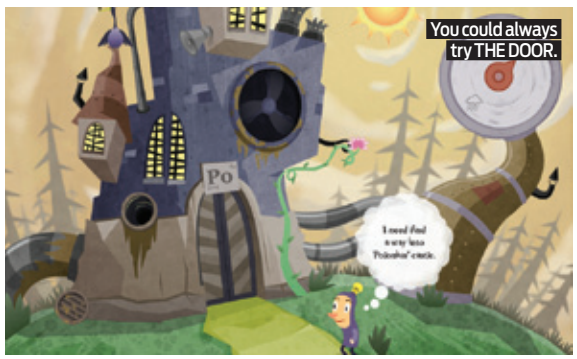
The reason for the head scratchery is that you're a time traveler who accidentally kills Hamlet and has to rescue Ophelia, but you may as well forget about that right now. Only a couple of screens in, you're shooting Polonius with his own death ray, and any pretense that this has anything to do with Shakespeare has long been thrown out of a closed window.

Each screen is pleasingly different in style, and there are a few genuinely clever puzzles, but it's a short game, and what really stands out are the infuriating bits, such as finding that a boss battle against Claudius requires insanely fast and precise clicking, or having to do the same puzzle three times in a row.

Where *Machinarium* (a similar game) got through its frustration barriers with wonderful and ever-more beautiful aesthetics, *Hamlet* simply becomes more obscure and irritating. There may not be many games like it, but *Hamlet* still comes across as the kid that loves to show unpopular classmates how to play 52 Card Pickup. Clever or not, it's why wedgies were invented. ■

PC GAMER **54**

I'm sure we all remember this scene from The Bard's play.


You could always try THE DOOR.

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Alawar Entertainment ◆ **Developer** Mif2000 ◆ **Multiplayer** none ◆ **Link** alawar.com ◆ **ESRB** E

ON THE JOB

Every day becomes Take Your Sim To Work Day with **THE SIMS 3: AMBITIONS**—at least someone's getting jobs in this economy ***by Dan Stapleton***

Need to know

What is it?
The second expansion pack to the virtual dollhouse simulator

Influenced by
What Not To Wear, Ghostbusters, Backdraft

Play it on
The Sims 3

Alternatively
The Sims 2: Open for Business (62%)

Copy protection
Disc check

Work is the new play. Before *Ambitions*, we never actually *saw* our Mini-Mes working their butts off to bring home the Simoleons; now that we can participate in that full third of their lives as it unfolds on our screens, it goes a long way towards convincing us that these little people are living real little lives. Next to the expansion's new active professions (Ghost Hunter, Firefighter, Private Investigator, Stylist and Architectural Designer), Sims in the existing off-screen, non-interactive occupations, like chefs, police or scientists, might as well be going to costume parties every weekday.

Click to work

Ambitions does a good job of making each of its professions a different experience, despite most player interaction being limited to clicking on the button that basically says "Do What The Story Text Just Said To Do." As a Ghost Hunter or Firefighter, your Sim responds to emergency calls, and while you can micromanage for slightly better results, the game will do 90 percent of the work for you if you let it. So you can sit back and watch your Sim either heroically kick down doors in a flaming building to free trapped Sims or bust ghosts. A PI requires slightly more hand-holding to solve his cases, which range from hacking jobs to tracking down missing property and Sims. Most of the fun is in the playful text descriptions of the cases, which are laced with over-the-top, noirish detective-speak for extra laughs and charm.

None of this is the least bit challenging—you literally have to force your Sim to go home and sleep through an emergency to fail. But these professions aren't about gameplay, it's about putting on a show. And it works remarkably well.

The other two professions, the Stylist and Architectural Designer, are much different. They're actually a clever means of giving players who love *The Sims 3* for its excellent character and building editors more opportunities to use their favorite tools. As the Stylist, you're paid to create outfits, hairstyles and makeup looks for the town's inhabitants—and the new town of Twinbrook is absolutely teeming with fashion disasters in dire need of your attention. As the AD, Sims will give you a generous budget and free reign to remodel their homes to add specific items like exercise equipment, baby stuff, doors or windows.

Sim taste

Of course, cynical players will quickly discover that, like the ability to love, accurately judging style and architecture aesthetic is beyond the capabilities of today's PCs. I could dress Sims in clashing colors, ridiculous galoshes and the ugliest sunglasses available, and as long as my skill was high enough, they loved me for it (not unlike the real fashion industry). Meanwhile my AD was hired to build a room for a new baby; I built a tiny, windowless tin-roofed shack in the back yard with the required baby items along with a creepy statue and a chainsaw—and I still got paid. It's also annoying when you're hired to add a home gym to a house that already has one, where you can literally delete and replace the identical items to "win." But as long as you *pretend* your clients are smarter than they are, it's all good fun.

Ambitions doesn't stop there—it adds a slew of other features, including subtle but helpful UI improvements, entertaining and lucrative new Inventing and Sculpting skills, a real estate market to invest in, tattooing, plus all the extra clothes, hairstyles, traits and miscellaneous objects we've come to expect in a *Sims* expansion.

However, there's *still* no hot tub. But for the most part, this expansion really gets what *The Sims* players love about the game, and does a superb job of giving us more of it. ■

Twinbrook is absolutely teeming with fashion disasters in dire need of your attention.

Sim Noir The case files of a hard-boiled Sim Private Eye

A pint-sized femme fatale hires me to track down the scum who stole her prized... mouthwash. Really? Can't you buy more? OK, I'm on the case.

The perp's not hard to find—he's her father. I try asking nice, but talking proves useless—he doesn't like me enough. It's time to get my hands dirty.

Rather than spend the time to ingratiate myself to someone who'd steal personal hygiene products from his own daughter, I bribe him with 25 Simoleons.

I return the stolen property to its rightful and grateful owner for a 500 Simoleon reward. Where'd the kid get 500 Simoleons? That's none of my concern.

◆ **Price** $30 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** EA ◆ **Developer** EA Redwood Shores ◆ **Multiplayer** No ◆ **Link** TheSims3.com ◆ **ESRB** E

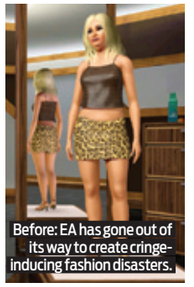
VERDICT

Putting Sims to work gives us more enjoyable ways to play, but it needs help from our imaginations to pull off the illusion.

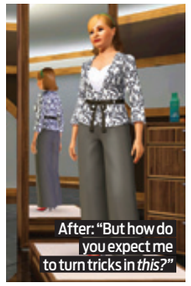
PC GAMER **85**

Bustin' makes me feel good.

That *also* makes me feel good.



Before: EA has gone out of its way to create cringe-inducing fashion disasters.



After: "But how do you expect me to turn tricks in *this*?"

It's never too late to get that tramp-stamp you've always wanted.

No remodel is complete without a dumpster and cardboard cow in the living room.

Finally, you get to play as the creepy guy in the bushes!

The Woo Woo 4000, not to be mistaken for the Woohoo 4000.

Brain-dead corporate mercs invade your personal space.

DISCOURAGING

The best thing about **THE SCOURGE PROJECT: EPISODE 1 & 2** is the feeling you get when you uninstall it *by Erik Belsaas*

Like a skilled saboteur of fun, *The Scourge Project* takes the third-person, cover-based gameplay of *Gears of War* and throws a whole bag of wrenches into it. The game's cover system falls apart when you first decide to pull the trigger, at which point every enemy (generic, corporate mercenaries) in the area will target you with pinpoint accuracy—and it only takes about three bullets to take you down. Even when cowering behind a wall and blind-firing, bad guys will shoot your exposed *hand* and kill you. That's right: it defeats the purpose of cover in a cover-based shooter.

If I had competent allies, this wouldn't be a game-breaker, but *Scourge*'s AI is absolutely the worst I have ever experienced. You can order your four-man squad around, but those orders will be promptly ignored by your squaddies in favor of charging the enemy, as if they believe themselves to be bulletproof. Usually, though, if they don't get stuck on a wall they'll walk over to where you fell and stand there uselessly until the same guy who killed you kills them, at which point your next squadmate walks over, forming a domino effect of failure. In a best-case scenario, they'll completely disregard your death and keep shooting at enemies. Even if this were forgivable (it most certainly is not), the checkpoints you start over at after death are spaced 15 minutes apart, forcing you to replay terrible scenes again and again.

The only way to dodge the AI problem is to play through the "story" in co-op, provided you can find people playing the same chapter as you. But those reinforcements won't save your experience—even if you manage to find someone playing, successfully connect and play through all four hours of game content (it's unclear when one episode ends and the other begins), the end of *The Scourge Project* gets so inhumanely difficult it won't matter how many friends you have. The multiplayer doesn't add much fun, unless you love playing *Who Can Grab the Minigun First?*, which is what every match boils down to.

Poor controls, framerates, animations and voice acting worse than a SyFy channel original movie round out a game I would rather be forced to eat than play again. ■

PC GAMER **23**

◆ **Price** $20 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** BITBOX S.L. ◆ **Developer** Tragarian Studios
◆ **Multiplayer** 4 player co-op, 16 player versus ◆ **Link** thescourgeproject.com ◆ **ESRB** NA

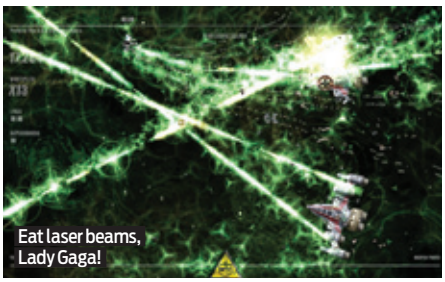
This kingdom is built by slave Kefling labor.

Be a benevolent giant in **A KINGDOM FOR KEFLINGS**

A Kingdom for Keflings puts you in charge of a village of peasants where the only goal is to build a castle. It seems simple enough, but there is a surprising amount of depth here. The gameplay is a middle ground between *Black & White* and *Dawn of Discovery*, mostly consisting of walking around and assigning jobs to your villagers by picking them up and throwing them at resources to gather or supplies to transport. Establishing an economy means you can build new buildings and technologies, eventually unlocking the fabled castle. There is no real way to lose, so *Keflings* lacks challenge, but it's a fun and relaxed way to kill a few hours. ■ *Erik Belsaas*

PC GAMER **70**

◆ **Price** $20 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Link** bit.ly/cSaBHa ◆ **ESRB** E



Eat laser beams, Lady Gaga!

BEAT HAZARD is the trippiest version of *Asteroids* ever made

Convert every drum beat in your favorite song into incoming missiles, every guitar strum into lasers and every crazy solo into explosions. This is *Beat Hazard*—a top-down arcade shooter where the levels you steer your spaceship through are generated from your music library. The game can range from relaxing, when playing country on easy difficulty, to incredibly frustrating with hardcore difficulty heavy metal.

The simple, rockin' gameplay is somewhat soured by an off-key file browser that sometimes took a painful four or five minutes to reach specific songs in my library. But the reward at the end is worthwhile for arcade and music lovers. ■ *Erik Belsaas*

PC GAMER **76**

◆ **Price** $10 ◆ **Release** Out now **Link** coldbeamgames.com ◆ **ESRB** NA

CRASH COURSE

If you can't outrun 'em, **SPLIT/SECOND** lets you annihilate 'em with massive, scenery-destroying explosions ***by Andy Mahood***

Need to know

What is it?
A pyrotechnically-charged arcade racer

Influenced by
Death Race

Play it on
Dual-core CPU, 3GB RAM, GeForce 8800/Radeon 4850

Alternatively
Burnout Paradise (85%)

Copy protection
Disc check

There are two areas where computer games traditionally excel: racing fast machines and blowing stuff up. But somehow, combining the two into a compelling entertainment experience isn't always as easy as one plus one equals two. Thankfully, Black Rock Studios has concocted a winning blend of speed and mayhem with *Split/Second*.

Although the driving mechanics are pretty standard for an arcade racer—plug in a gamepad, bury the throttle, brake as little as possible, win—the real satisfaction comes from employing "Power Play" shockwaves to trigger violent roadside events that wipe out your rivals. These Power Play offensives range from massive truck bombs to scything cranes that can flick cars from the track like insects. Factor in the varied and richly detailed background scenery and the delicious destructibility of practically everything around you, and *Split/Second* elevates the action into a jaw-dropping visual feast that pushes that "just one more race" yardstick to dramatic new levels.

Shock and awe

Your three-segment Power Bar fills up as you execute driving maneuvers like drafting, drifting and catching air. A level one Power Play will trigger impressive carnage, but a cataclysmic level two shockwave can bring down entire buildings and collapse Golden Gate-sized bridges. This introduces another terrific feature called Route Changer, where you can create shortcuts or entirely new track layouts by demolishing conveniently placed structures.

Each successful event earns points to open up new "episodes." The core Season mode features 11 multi-event episodes that unlocks races and venues you can revisit in Quick Play mode. The variety of race modes ranges from conventional multi-lap chases to knockout events and survival contests, where you try to avoid exploding barrels dropped from moving 18-wheelers or missiles fired from hovering gunships. An eight-player online and LAN mode and a two-player splitscreen mode rounds out the set of options.

Finishing well unlocks progressively faster and stronger cars, but true to *Split/Second's* action/arcade roots, your race doesn't end when you crash or end up crushed under a caved-in expressway. You simply reset further back in the field and try to catch up.

Sugar in the gas

Split/Second's consistently addictive gameplay would have earned it a higher score but for some discouraging stability issues. I encountered regular crashes to the desktop on 64-bit Windows 7 and persistent graphic stutters under XP. What's more, the game's lap counter would bizarrely mess up at critical stages by extending a two-lap race into infinity, while arbitrarily cutting other races in half. On one occasion, it even credited me with a win a few yards past the start line (and a 0.3-second lap record to boot).

These patchable annoyances certainly hurt the continuity, but patient types will likely forgive them just to get to the good explody stuff. And with so many cars, buildings and structures to race through, and ultimately obliterate with Hollywood aplomb, *Split/Second* delivers a megaton of rewarding arcade racing. ■

The real satisfaction comes from employing "Power Play" shockwaves to trigger violent roadside events and wipe out your rivals.

VERDICT

Stability issues notwithstanding, this explosive new racer is as exhilarating and addictive as they come.

PC GAMER **73**

Things to Avoid in *Split/Second*

Or at least keep a wary eye on while in the lead

Overpasses They may take a while to implode and come crashing down, but when they do, you're toast.

Dumpsters You can fit a lot of explosives in a container this sizeable; the shockwave will push a car right off the track.

Garbage trucks Don't expect to hear the back-up horn when these scavenger-class obstacles reverse right into your path.

Huge earth movers Heavy machinery suspended on cranes. Think fly swatter meets fly, if you're not the imaginative type.

Airplanes parked in strange locations. Loaded with jet fuel, these jumbo jets are giant bombs just waiting to go off.

Heavy objects suspended from helicopters If we even have to warn you about this, you're not cut out for this game.

◆ **Price** $40 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Disney Interactive Studios ◆ **Developer** Black Rock Studio ◆ **Multiplayer** 8 players
◆ **Link** bit.ly/9FEuum ◆ **ESRB** E

You can violently wipe your rivals from the track, but it only buys you a few seconds before they respawn.

Speed limits strictly enforced: One game mode has you dodging missiles fired from a gunship.

Create alternate paths by removing inconveniently placed objects...like buildings and overpasses.

Perform drifts, jumps and drafting maneuvers to fill your Power Bar for explosive offensive counter-punches.

The game plays out like a reality TV show, complete with auditions, episodes and cancellations.

Each course has lots of varied, dramatic and destructible scenery.

"The next person who asks me about my missus..."

Missing from the game's social features is the ability to loudly cough at the most opportune moments.

It's golf, played online.

TWO's mechanics are comfortingly familiar—you swing, you hit, you splash.

UNA-FORE-DABLE

No amount of **TIGER WOODS PGA TOUR ONLINE**'s nagging should part you with your cash ***by Craig Pearson***

Need to know

What is it?
An online-only golf game with 10 courses that you launch from the web browser

Influenced by
Battlefield Heroes

Play it on
1.5GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, Nvidia 6600/ATI Radeon x800

Alternatively
CustomPlay Golf 2010

Copy protection
Always-on internet connection

The beta of *Tiger Woods PGA Tour Online* wowed us. A full, slick golf game in your browser? Intelligently connecting players by making the game fully online all the time? Have a hug, EA. You've proven the power of the platform and reinvigorated an aging format. Nothing can go wrong. Hang on a second, what's that sharp thing in my back...?

The full game introduced a payment structure so abhorrent it made me shout at my browser. *TWO* costs $10 a month or $60 a year for full access. Why is this stupid? Golf is a static thing. The mechanics haven't changed in years: you swing and hit the ball. And in *TWO* it's almost impossible to *not* place your shot vaguely where you want it to land. The challenge is in the fine-grain control, fighting against the wind, drawing or fading to land on the flat of a downward sloping green. But that's about it, and you can do all that in the two free courses.

In the hole

So what are you paying a fee for? Unlimited access to all 10 fairways. You also get a slew of points to spend on things like branded club upgrades and clothes to go on the meager choice of four male avatars. Points are an interesting currency: while the yearly sub gets you $15 worth of points to start off with, if you take out a monthly sub or play for free and want to upgrade your gear with the branded stuff in the club house, you'll have to buy them with real money. It makes sense that the free players are asked to pay, but the monthly subscribers are paying more for the same level of access as the yearly subs ($120 per year versus $60), and yet they have to pay even more for the in-game currency? Every extra dollar they ask you to spend is more reason not to pay.

It's such a disappointment. What was a shining example of what could be achieved on the web when it was free looks unavoidably dim when you're asked to part with so much money. The courses are decently modeled, but nothing special. The golfers are off-the-shelf models, with a few petty variations in apparel color to give you the illusion of player customization.

The high cost has been a clear shock to the community, and they've fled in droves. When you play, you're automatically placed on the same course as everyone else who's online so that you can watch their shots and chat with them. The two free courses are still thriving, but the paid courses are predictably deserted.

It's heartbreaking. *TWO* is a clear win for the technology, but it's been made to take advantage of the players as much as the platform. ■

VERDICT

A decent game hampered by a completely stupid and ill-thought-out payment scheme. A bad year for Tiger.

PC GAMER **50**

◆ **Price** $10 per month, $60 per year ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** EA ◆ **Developer** EA
◆ **Multiplayer** 4-player rounds, multiplayer tournaments ◆ **Link** tigerwoodsonline.ea.com ◆ **ESRB** E

It's not *Crysis*, but this game has its graphical moments.

Seems they've got a bone to pick with you.

Prepare yourself: The horde of miscellaneous aliens approaches!

MORE OF THE SAM

Run, shoot, run, shoot and run in **SERIOUS SAM HD: THE SECOND ENCOUNTER** ***by Dan Stapleton***

Sam Stone is like the bus in *Speed*, except with guns. If he stops moving for even a moment, he's dead—overwhelmed by an ever-rising tide of enemies, some of whom like to explode.

Played in co-op with a buddy, *Serious Sam HD: The Second Encounter* is a simple, intense run-and-gun shooter with literally hundreds of enemies of all shapes and sizes streaming toward you, as if drawn in by powerful magnets in your pants. It's an absurd game full of absurd things, such as a gallery of outlandish enemies—like jack-o'-lantern-headed chainsaw murderers and sunburned space aliens—that have nothing to do with the time-traveling settings or even each other. It makes no apologies for its lack of sophisticated AI or its blocky, undetailed level design. Death is meaningless—you just respawn and resume firing. Short, controlled bursts are for wimps.

Most of the joy of co-op disappears when played solo, however, and is replaced by frustration. Instead of respawning, you reload to whenever you last remembered to hit F6 to quicksave (there's no autosave). If you do play single-player, be sure to tone down the difficulty to Easy or Tourist to avoid reload rage.

Compared to *The First Encounter*, not much has changed. Sam has a handful of extra weapons, including a chainsaw that cartoonishly bisects enemies, a supremely powerful sniper rifle and a room-clearing bomb, but for the most part the *SE* is little more than a bunch of new maps. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but I do wish that Croteam's level designers would recognize that fussy jumping puzzles aren't exactly their strong suit.

Within *The Second Encounter* there are three mini-campaigns that take you through South America, Babylon and medieval settings, but after the South American battle, I'd seen all the weapons and enemies that *SE* had to offer. The game does its best to mix things up with unexpected arenas, like a battle inside a rotating cylinder. But many, like one where you and all the enemies are literally bouncing off the walls, make both aiming and dodging nearly impossible and turns the game into an aggravating crap shoot.

These are just brief interludes, though, and in co-op, you don't have the problem of having to start over every time you die, so grab a buddy and dive in, guns blazing. ■

PC GAMER **70**

◆ **Price** $20 ◆ **Release** Out now ◆ **Publisher** Devolver Digital ◆ **Developer** Croteam ◆ **Multiplayer** 2 player co-op, 16 versus
◆ **Link** seriousamhd.com ◆ **ESRB** M

PC GAMER

How we review

Wherever possible, we finish every game before finalizing the review. We review each game on its own merits and match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The primary aim of the reviews section is to help you make buying decisions. As such, we'll review paid-for content of all types in addition to the latest big-name releases.

Our scoring system explained

0-30% Intolerable
A crime against gaming. Whether it's bugs or bad design, this should be shot on sight.

31-45% Weak
Serious flaws ruin any chance this game has of offering sustained fun.

46-60% Mediocre
A very ordinary game, quickly forgotten. Think twice, even if you find it cheap.

61-75% Fair
A decent effort that, but for a little more polish, coulda been a contender.

76-89% Good
Enjoyable, well-made and entertaining—just falling short of true greatness.

90%+ Editor's Choice
Oozing class, this is the work of experts at the top of their game. Bravo, folks!

PC GAMER EDITOR'S CHOICE ★★★★★
A game scoring 80% or more is eligible to receive the PC Gamer Editor's Choice award. The Editor's personal seal of approval means we think the recipient is a truly great example of its genre.

PC Gamer's 10 Latest and Greatest

Sleep is Death (90%)
July '10

Love (86%)
July '10

Dawn of War II: Chaos Rising (91%)
May '10

Mass Effect 2 (90%)
March '10

BioShock 2 (90%)
March '10

Left 4 Dead 2 (92%)
January '10

Dragon Age: Origins (92%)
Holiday '09

Batman: Arkham Asylum (93%)
December '09

Resident Evil 5 (93%)
November '09

REINSTALL
CLASSICS OF PC GAMING REVISITED

There are very strict laws against skipping in this dimension.

Classic Game Club

OUT OF THIS WORLD: BEAUTIFUL HIGH-STAKES ADVENTURE OR HEINOUS TORTURE?

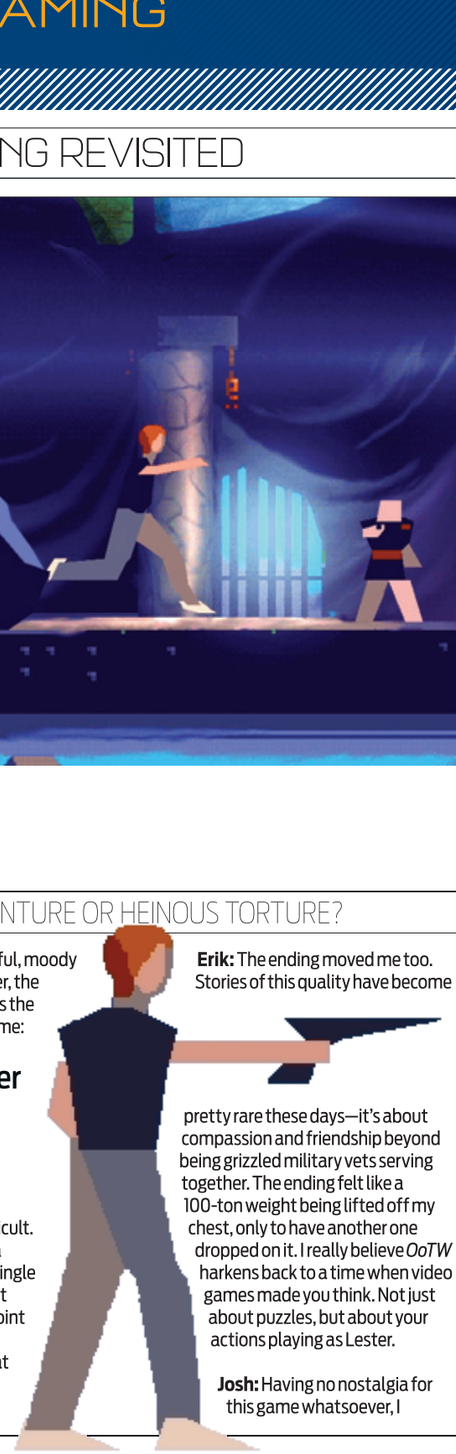
READ ME
PUBLISHER MC2
DEVELOPER Eric Chahi
WHAT WE SAID THEN We didn't. 1991 release pre-dated PC Gamer by three years.
REQUIRES Netbook-friendly; Windows 7-compatible
GET IT FOR $10, Gog.com. Includes Making Of video, technical handbook, dev diary, and a remixed soundtrack.

Logan: *Out of This World* (published as *Another World* in the UK) is one of the most beloved games of my youth. It had simple graphics (relative to today's games), minimal sound effects and absolutely no dialog whatsoever, and yet it told a story ultimately so moving that I remember having to hide behind a Kleenex for a while. But 10 minutes into the gorgeous, higher-resolution *15th Anniversary Edition*, I had to wonder: how the hell did I ever finish this game? It lacks anything but the merest shred of sympathy or mercy for the player. The trial-and-error puzzles are crueler than anything I witnessed in the *Saw* movies.

Dan: I do recall playing this beautiful, moody game way back in the day. However, the reason I didn't reach the end then is the same as why I didn't reach it this time:

How the hell did I ever finish this game? It lacks the merest shred of sympathy.

It's punishingly, aggravatingly difficult. The combination of tricky jumps, a fragile character who dies from a single laser shot and a miserly checkpoint save system is frustrating to the point where after a dozen failures I just want to quit rather than replay that part one more time. If I ever see that ending, it'll be on YouTube.



Erik: The ending moved me too. Stories of this quality have become pretty rare these days—it's about compassion and friendship beyond being grizzled military vets serving together. The ending felt like a 100-ton weight being lifted off my chest, only to have another one dropped on it. I really believe *OoTW* harkens back to a time when video games made you think. Not just about puzzles, but about your actions playing as Lester.

Josh: Having no nostalgia for this game whatsoever, I jumped straight to that frustrated and bewildered stage. The game quickly became a twisted, morbid hybrid of *Lemmings* and the movie *The Prestige* as I repeatedly drove my character to his death in the name of science, trying to understand what my goal was and how to accomplish it. That poor man's life is an expendable resource, and I spent it recklessly.

Trial and error as a game design philosophy isn't always a bad thing, but *OotW* isn't one of its success stories. My biggest gripe with the game is that not only is each puzzle solved *exclusively* through trial and error, but even the order in which you're supposed to solve puzzles is discovered the same way.

I hate to be such a buzzkill, but anyone who loved this game is better off leaving it in their memories. Digging up *OoTW* for another playthrough will only destroy any good memories you have of it.

The cast of *OoTW* will now perform Disney's *Aladdin*.

Your gun can be used to erect a force field to protect you...

...or it can be used more awesomely to blow stuff up.

The graphics hold up well, still captivating and charming today.

L: Wow, Josh. I can't wait to find something dear to your youth and destroy it in front of you. (Maybe a security blanket or a favorite teddy bear?) Yes, it's hard. Yes, it's unreasonable at times. But it's also a great reminder of how much a game can achieve when it establishes hard limits for itself. Dialog might have shattered the desperate connection you feel with your alien buddy, or led to some ridiculous, bottom-shelf, sci-fi yarn. Instead, the excitement and emotion builds in the game in a completely unique way, sometimes with just a single gesture or look. What other game told a story like that?

J: I won't argue with you that dropping dialogue was probably for the best. What sort of meaningful interactions could the two characters have had that says more than the risks they go through to save one another? Actions speak louder than words, and in a case when the words would've been an awkward-at-best attempt at masculine bonding, doubly so. And you're both total babies for crying.

E: Total babies who can figure out how to play a game with two buttons and time a couple jumps right. To be honest, I found the trial and error satisfying. The feeling of executing the perfect run through a section of the game after repeatedly failing is exhilarating, and it makes you feel that if Lester is truly someone who is trying so hard to live, he must be worth saving.

L: Ooh, well played.

You tried and you have errored; please reboot and try again.

And that's where they get the expression "like a zombie in headlights."

Is there anything more terrifying than casino lobby carpet?

1 Tactical hiding

MOD SCARY STORIES MADE THIRD-PERSON **FLESH**

Don't get out of your car, average-looking man! Oh, fine, but don't follow that blood trail...what are you doing! There's a body at the end of it! At least you aren't stupid enough to go into those wood—*oh no,* he's going in! The idiot! There's obviously going to be something horrible in that dark shack. Come on, don't go INTO the shack! Oh, god. He's going in. He's only got a flashlight, he can't even use any weapons.

If he were to see any horrific creatures(say, of the blue, glowing ghoul persuasion), all the foolish fool would be able to do is crouch and shut off his light. Thankfully, he hasn't seen any...OH GOD, THERE'S TWO. Two horrible zombie things! Hide, man, hide! No, don't go out there! Don't try and sneak past them, into that creepy mansion on the hill! Your deliberately limited controls, while heightening tension, mean you can't even strafe. One plus side is your strange ability to see the world through the eyes of these zombies: pressing the right mouse button to cycle through the perspectives of nearby monsters and check their patrol patterns and proximity—but still, a gun would be preferable. Even if it is against the ethos of this neat *Half-Life 2* mod.

Still, though, no one could be stupid enough to actually go into the foreboding house on the hill. This must be the point where he turns around and makes his way back to the car. Apparently not. He's going inside, *actually going inside*, solving *Resident Evil*-esque puzzles of statue collection and clock recalibration along the way. He's inside the mansion now, and—GAH!—there's a skinless *thing* talking to him! Run away, average man! Ignore the thing telling you about the mysterious past of the Blair family! Ignore him asking you to delve further into their occult spookenings, cover your ears and leg it instead! Run away from this neat, spooky mod, and its genuine sense of foreboding. Unless, average man, you enjoy five well-assembled levels, and enjoy watching the screen through cracks in your fingers. **EL**

SIZE 455MB LINK bit.ly/9cDLTB

2 MODS

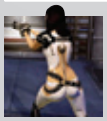
EFFECT CHANGE

THE BEST CUSTOM COSTUMES FOR MASS EFFECT 2

In the future, uniform standards have slipped. The modding community is on hand to mend matters with their Spring Collection.

Sexy Samara
Because the default space armor just isn't breasty enough, blue-faced alien supercop Samara now has this more revealing little number. *bit.ly/drdSQp*

Gunz For Girlz
Gunmetal is so boring. How about splashing your weaponry with hot pink to offset the blue of your companions' weird, squid-like heads? *bit.ly/bdLpdy*



Miranda Suit Panels
Miranda's attire almost looks like something someone might wear in space. This won't do. More see-through segments! *bit.ly/aPpV3A*

Jack No Tattoo mod
Tattoos will be, like, *so* over by the year 2185. Laser-remove all of Jack's body ink with this patch. *bit.ly/aWjXKt*

Find Panau's secrets and blow 'em up!

GET STARTED

DIFFICULTY Easy
TIME Two hours

VITAL LINKS

BOLOPatch: it adds the fun
m0.to/BOLOPatch

A full list of *Just Cause 2* mods
www.justcause2mods.com

An interactive Google map of *Just Cause 2*'s Panau
bit.ly/ac0ZGJ

The Cheat Engine
www.cheatengine.org

CRAIG PEARSON'S GUIDE TO DOING AWESOME THINGS IN **JUST CAUSE 2**

The joyous extremes of the fun-with-grappling-hooks sim *Just Cause 2* also highlight its few lows. Sure, you can tether a car to another and drag it along, busting communist propaganda, but it's not long before there's a sad little 'plink' and the car disconnects, ruining your carefully set up fun.

That's been fixed, not by the developers, but by modders. In a game without any mod tools or SDK, the *Just Cause 2* community has created a rich variety of tweaks. Ropes have been strengthened and multiplied, the camera is a bit more agile and the severe lack of ammo is now no longer an issue. Some might call it cheating, but BOLOPatch, the *Just Cause 2* trainer we're recommending, lets you have a lot more fun in tropical paradise.

Once you have the game running as you'd like it to, you can explore it as it deserves. It's a big world, and there are secrets hidden in Panau. The in-game map will enable you to set a handy marker at any of the coordinates we've given you below, where we've picked out the hidden treasures the developers have scattered across their 600 square-mile game world.

1 BOLOPatch

The first step to making *Just Cause 2* more awesome is to download BOLOPatch (*m0.to/BOLOPatch*): it's a "trainer" app you turn on once the game is running, via Alt+Tab. Enable "infinite ammo" and "strong rope". "Multi-rope" works, but it can break the game by removing your ability to release a tether. You can also use the editor to change how much money you have and how many parts for weapon and vehicle upgrades you've collected.

2 Folder power!

Create a folder within your main *Just Cause 2* folder named "Dropzone." Anything you place in it overrides game files of the same name, so you can easily mod vehicles and weapons without having to delete core game files. Place the Sea Plane mod (*bit.ly/9WYxug*) in there, for example, and the Pell Silverbolt 6 Jet will be able to fly *under water*. You can also block the tedious black market cutscenes from playing every time with *bit.ly/aGM7rB*.

3 Take awesome screenshots

There are three problems to overcome when setting up amazing screens or videos. The HUD, the camera angles and the speed of the vehicles. The HUD can be removed in Options, and BOLOPatch enables you to delete the crosshair. The camera automatically recenters if left for a second, something that placing the NoCAC mod (*bit.ly/ab7LJR*) in the Dropzone folder rectifies.

4 Slow it all down

Cheat Engine (*www.cheatengine.org*) can enable slow-mo. Load it, select Process from the menu and highlight Just Cause 2. Under Edit, Settings and Hotkeys you'll see entries for "speedhack speed 1", "speedhack speed 2," etc. Select the first, change the speed to 0.2 and press any key to bind it. Do the same for the second, but keep its speed at "1." When playing, the first key will make the game run at that speed, and the second will restore it to normal.

5 Big explosions

Check "infinite health" in BOLOPatch before you use this triggered bomb patch: *bit.ly/cpgBah*. It replaces the normal explosions with vast, shockwave-creating blasts. They guarantee the 100% destruction you need to take over settlements, avoiding the odd occasions where you can't find that last destructible generator. Multiple, huge explosions all over the screen are awesome. Drop these files in the Dropzone folder, drop the C4 in-game and run.

6 Desmond's hatch

If you think the sculpted landscape of Panau, rocky and draped in vegetation, looks a bit like the island seen in the TV show *Lost*, you're not the only one. The developers put two *Lost* Easter eggs in the game. On an island that crashes planes as you fly over it, a crashed jet with a search sign is found at X: 1200, Y: 3620. How do we know it's a *Lost* reference? If you investigate the surrounding forest, you'll come across the hatch at X 1765, Y: 4350.

7 Whale of a time

Perhaps the saddest, most lip-trembling Easter egg ever. At X: 29630, Y: 31330 you'll find a dead beached whale, far too well-realized for cetaceaphiles: the dead beastie's jaw hangs open and the skin's got a rotten look to it. Toss a grenade and it'll explode, showering blubber over a huge radius, leaving behind its detailed ribcage and rewarding you with a health pack for your barbarism.

8 Hark! A shark!

Not a real shark, though. A shark fin attached to a propeller in a lake in Panau's desert area, at X: 12730 Y: 22494. I love that someone at Avalanche was tasked to create AI for an autonomous shark fin. It's ridable if you grapple onto it, so you can fight the nearby military boats or tether it to vehicles so it needn't be cooped up in the lake. I set my fin free to wander the azure waters.

9 In hot air

The slowest vehicle in the game, the balloon, is hidden away at X: 7390, Y: 16150. You need to remove the sandbags, by either shooting them or meleeing them off the basket. Stand in the basket and hammer "E"' to prime the burners and take off. To steer, run in the direction you want to go. It's actually slower than if you were running, but it's a relaxing diversion. And if you want to take it somewhere, you can always tether it to another vehicle.

10 Soapy bubble

400 rounds of soapy, eye-stinging death! Without the death. In fact, this bubble gun is the least exclamation-mark worthy gun in the game. The cleansing spheres can be found in a tower, in a field of strange white trees at the following coordinates: X: 4211, Y: 25951. Warning: While the bubbles are relaxing and cute, if you fire them near or at the AI, they will react, causing pedestrians to whine and the military to respond with bullets.

11 Pie Island

This one's a bit of a trek, but worth it if you like adding exotic game-snaps to your album. And if you like pie. Way at the top of the map at coordinates X: 24500, Y: 900 is an island shaped like a slice of pie. It has a snowy top, which is supposed to be the icing and is kept topped up by a localized snowstorm, and the crust actually rises as you get nearer. It's a tiny speck, miles from anywhere relevant, so you don't have to worry about sharing this pie.

12 Race and rodeo

There's no shortage of race missions, but if that's not enough for you, or if you just fancy a place full of fast cars to boost, there's a full racetrack near the main airport: X: 9780 Y: 114120. Race the ultra-speedy cars for fun, or drop in a vehicle from the black market to see if it's possible to race a quadbike, ice cream van or jet. Or you could use them to practice your high speed tethering skills. Joining speeding cars to overhead signs with unbreakable rope is *fun*.

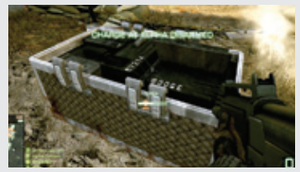
SKILLS

WIN AT BAD COMPANY 2'S RUSH MODE

CONDUCT THE PERFECT ASSAULT

1 Rush mode is all about destroying enemy MCOM stations. Go Recon with the Explosives perk or Assault with a shotgun: Recon lets you plant C4 charges without warning the enemy of the attack, Assault lets you do rapid and sustained damage.

2 As you make your way in, try to do so through fences and light cover. Use your knife to cut a route. That will allow others on your team to beat a hasty charge through the fences if you should need backup. It'll help you escape too.



3 Once in, lay some charges. It'll take twelve to destroy the MCOM. The Recon should have enough thanks to the perk, and the Assault always has his ammo box. Try and catch some enemies in the blast for extra points.

BONUS SKILL

BATTLEFIELD OF VIEW

Edit the angle-width of your game camera in "My Documents > BFBC2 > settings.ini," by changing your field of view settings. 65 FoV seems about optimal to us.

The Hard Stuff

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

TESTED

HailStorm (Black OPS Edition)

Digital Storm

This PC costs more than *seven grand*. I just wanted to get that out of the way. It's like telling somebody on a first date that you have a criminal record. You know it might be a deal-breaker, but who knows, maybe it'll turn them on.

Inside: everything you'd find on the top shelf of a high-end computer store, including the first GeForce GTX 480 (1.5GB) videocards from Nvidia. Two of them. In SLI. Together with Intel's hexacore Core i7-980X processor, these cards vault the rig past the 30,000 mark in 3DMark06—the first system I've ever tested to do so. But with great power, comes great power requirements: The HailStorm gets its juice from a thermo-nuclear 1500W Silverstone PSU (Nvidia recommends at least a 600W PSU for a *single* GeForce GTX 480).

If your PC room is small or the air circulation poor, it will definitely get noticeably warmer.

The glowing blue panel in the front is a peek-a-boo window into the reservoir of the closed-loop watercooler. Oddly, the cooler is only affixed to the CPU and chipset; the GPUs make do with heat pipes and case fans. Although fan noise is certainly below average for a system with internal organs as powerful as those of a musk ox, the system exhausts a tremendous amount of heat—if your PC room is small or the air circulation poor, it will definitely get noticeably warmer.

Here's something I wish every PC had: The drive bays are all accessible through the front panel, and without tools; the trays slide out easily, and you can pop in a new hard drive or a shiny new solid-state drive and have a fresh volume (or backup) in just a few seconds. I/O ports are located behind a panel at the top of the front panel, and beneath that is the Sound Blaster breakout box with its cleverly designed pop-out volume knob.

The wiring is impeccable, the interior spacious and attractively lit with cold-cathode lights top and bottom, and the gleaming white case and brushed-steel front face plate adds a shot of classiness that's usually overlooked in gaming rig design, to put it mildly.

But it's *seven grand*, and I can't help but feel that it doesn't quite add up. This is a first-class gaming PC and benchmark-buster if there ever was one, but when you can buy almost-as-good performance for less than half the price, the nerd tax you're paying for the latest and greatest hardware seems to be more expensive than any component in the rig.

$7,436 ($6,936 with $500 discount at press time)
digitalstormonline.com

VERDICT

One tenth of this price would buy you a decent gaming PC, but the fastest machine we've tested doesn't come cheap.

PC GAMER **82**

SPEC ◆ **CPU** Core i7-980X 3.33GHz ◆ **RAM** 6GB DDR3 ◆ **GPU** 2X Nvidia GTX 480 ◆ **Storage** 150GB SSD, 1.5TB 7,200RPM HD ◆ **Case** Custom ◆ **OS** Win 7 Home Premium 64-bit ◆ **3DMark06/Vantage** 30726/WNR ◆ **Crysis** 76.7fps ◆ **SupCom** 57.8 fps

Perfect your graphics settings

GET STARTED

DIFFICULTY Easy
TIME 30 minutes

VITAL LINKS

AMD GPU drivers
bit.ly/ATIdrivers

NVIDIA GPU drivers
bit.ly/Nvidiadrivers

Maximum PC's high-value list of PC gaming hardware
bit.ly/maxpcbest

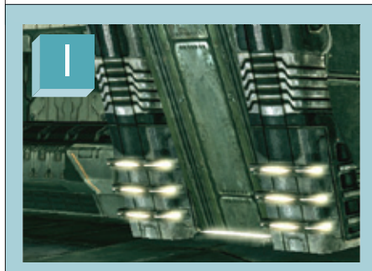
GPU-Z: Your bestest buddy for determining the exact specs of your installed videocard
bit.ly/gpuzdownload

CHRIS COMISKEY'S HANDYMAN BOOKLET FOR COMPREHENDING, TWEAKING AND MAXIMIZING YOUR GAMING VISUALS

Anti-aliasing. Anisotropic filtering. V-sync. They sound like things Scotty might do to the main deflector dish to escape the Klingons, but these quixotic terms aren't just there to confuse us. In fact, these video options are powerful tools that can help you transform your stock-configured Ugly Betty of a game into a tanned-and-glistening Megan Fox.

But unless you've got a rig brawny enough to grind out 60 frames per second with every slider and option throttled to Very High, you do need to understand what each setting does, when to use it and when the performance penalty isn't worth the prettiness payoff. You should also know that playing games with the incredible visual potential of *STALKER: Call of Pripyat*, *BioShock 2* and *Just Cause 2* without ever adjusting their visual settings is a criminal offense in 49 of the 50 U.S. states (Alaska is a bit more lenient).

So don't let a lack of configuration know-how cheat you out of the best visuals your games have to offer. We've explained six of these intimidating terms in plain English to turn you into a master tinkerer in just a few minutes. So make sure you're running the latest drivers for your videocard, and let's dive in!

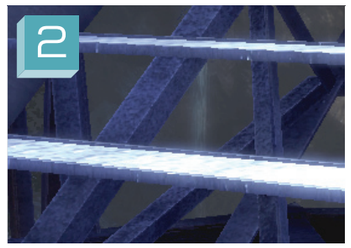


Native resolution

Your display won't look it best unless it is set to its native resolution—generally the maximum setting Windows will allow. The image being displayed and the physical display should have a 1:1 ratio of pixels. At 1920x1600, for example, your PC is sending your display an image with 3,072,000 pixels (1920 multiplied by 1600), and your display has 3,072,000 pixels; hence, a sharp image. A place for every pixel, and every pixel in its place.

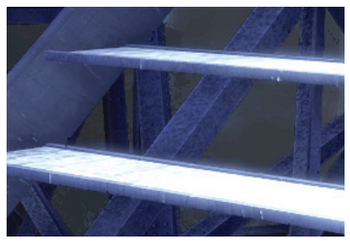
Non-native resolution

Running a game at a resolution lower than your display's native resolution may speed things up (your GPU doesn't have to process as many pixels), but at a painful cost. Running a native 1920x1200 screen, for example, at any other value forces the monitor to stretch and scale the pixels, which results in varying levels of blurriness and eye-gouging distortions.



Anti-aliasing off

Computers don't much care for curvy lines. If you look closely at a large circle on your display, you'll see that it's really made of many stair-stepped jumps from one column of pixels to the next—you might know them as "jaggies." Anti-aliasing (or AA) is a technique used to minimize jaggies. It does come at a big cost to your framerate, but is usually worth it. A lack of AA is perhaps the most immediately noticeable visual deformity.



Anti-aliasing on

When AA is enabled, it acts like a powerful grader to a bumpy dirt road, leveling out all the rough and rocky surfaces along the way. Think of 2xAA as a garden rototiller, and 16xAA as an industrial diesel bulldozer bent on jaggie genocide. Even a small dosage of AA can mean death to your framerates, so start with 2x and work your way up until the performance hit becomes noticeable.

Anisotropic filtering off

The bushes above appear as though viewed by a character in need of a good optometrist. If you find yourself squinting at blurry and distorted faraway objects in your game, you've either got a glob of Vaseline inside your monitor (unlikely, we hope) or anisotropic filtering (AF) is turned off. With zero AF, all the draw distance in the world won't do you much good, as remote castles might as well be shapeless clumps of clay.

Anisotropic filtering on

With AF on, those once unrecognizable blob-like shapes in the distance become crisp and well-defined objects of interest. And since AF requires significantly less GPU muscle than AA, even the lowliest of graphics cards can enjoy a small 4x to 6x sampling of your daily AF nutritional requirements without any major consequences. The higher you can crank it the better, of course.

Low texture quality

Setting a game to minimal texture quality (sometimes called "level of detail") is like buying a Porsche and scraping off the paint—it's still a speedy ride, but it looks like a piece of junk. Your performance will rise noticeably, but a shed will lose its rusty cracked surfaces, and weapons will say goodbye to their high-tech whizbangs or weathered and dirty coatings.

High texture quality

Cranking texture quality to max brings life to an object's skin. And if you can't see any open wounds festering in the bellies of zombies, what's the point? Texture detail isn't too much work for a GPU, but exercise caution when cranking—if your card carries less than 512MB of video RAM, your frames per second may tank. Run GPU-Z (from the vital links) if you're not sure.

Low shadow quality

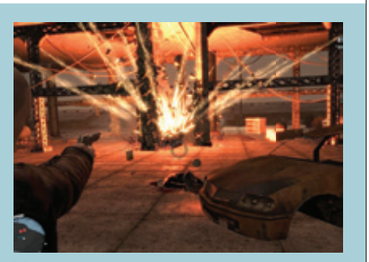
Shadow quality is a relatively recent addition to the repertoire of tricks developers use to increase realism and immersion in their games. Unfortunately, detailed shadows do carry a strong performance penalty, while a basement-level setting can result in shadow effects that can look primitive at best and just wrong at worst. Admittedly, though, if performance is a problem, shadow quality is one of the first things we'd dial down.

High shadow quality

If you have the videocard beef, you'll want to enable high/dynamic shadows. Few things have as big of an effect on making a game environment feel realistic as maxed-out lighting and shadow effects, and atmospheric games like *Crysis*, *STALKER*, *Metro 2033* and *BioShock* simply can't be enjoyed to their full potential without them. But again, shadows can put you at a big disadvantage in multiplayer matches, where smooth framerates trump immersion.

V-sync off

Vertical synchronization, or V-sync, puts your videocard and display in perfect synchronization, so that your card is delivering frames at exactly the rate your display is capable of drawing them. It's the first option you should disable for a performance boost. Depending on your game and system, however, you may see "tearing," where two misaligned frames appear at once.



V-sync on

Turning V-sync on prevents page tearing, but at a potentially severe penalty to your frame rates. With V-sync enabled, your frames per second could be capped at half of your monitor's refresh rate. If you've got a 60Hz panel, that means you could be stuck at a pitiful 30 frames per second. That's still totally playable, but not as silky-smooth as you could be getting.

TESTED

24-inch E246W

Sceptre

My first multi-monitor setup required an industrial rack rated at 500 lbs. per shelf to support twin 21-inch, 1600x1200 CRTs in my studio apartment. Today, I'm looking at a 23.6-inch, 1920x1080 LCD display that's just 1.5 inches at it thickest point, weighs 13 pounds all told, and costs less than $300. With the money and space I'm saving, I could easily upgrade to a king-size bed.

For the slenderness and startlingly light weight of the E246W from Sceptre, we can thank LED backlighting, which also consumes far less power than traditional cold cathode fluorescent lamps (CCFL). It's been used mostly on Mac portables due to its high price, but mass production is dragging costs down out of the stratosphere.

Thin is win

LED backlighting has been praised over LCD displays for its wider color gamut, but the Sceptre E246W is really not the finest example of this. Color reproduction is merely so-so across all the preset modes and doesn't markedly improve with manual adjustments. The viewing angle is also quite narrow, and even a slight elevation or sideways angle throws hues way off. The built-in speakers aren't much to speak about, and my biggest gripe is with the awful puzzle-quest menu system hidden behind four unlabeled, touch-sensitive buttons.

So we know the image isn't great. But you know what? It's not bad, either. And there's lots to be said for an affordable LED-backlit display that cuddles up snugly to the wall of a small room and doesn't ruin fast racing action with Blur-o-Vision.

PC GAMER 82

$270, sceptre.com

Q&A

Onboard vs. X-Fi

Q: I recently built a new gaming rig, but decided not to install a sound card this time. My EVGA X58 SLI motherboard has built-in Realtek HD audio, which sounds great to me, but I wanted to know what you thought about the latest solutions for sound these days. I see that only the Dream system in Hard Stuff Trinity currently has a sound-card listed, and even then it's a mid-priced selection. Are they just not worth it anymore because onboard sound has caught up?
Bruce Bristol

A: *This is the kind of question that starts fist fights. Some will say onboard audio is just fine. Others will say onboard audio is only fine if you are deaf. But the answer is another question: How will you be listening?*

If you have a nice set of 2.1 desktop speakers (still my favorite: the GigaWorks T40 Series II, $150, creative.com), play Counter-Strike: Source *and* Assassin's Creed 2 *and simmer in the bathtub while listening to iTunes, then onboard audio really is just fine. But if you've got a 5.1 speaker set and really want to get the most out of the amazing sound of a game like* Battlefield: Bad Company 2 *and that* Saving Private Ryan *Blu-ray, and you prefer to listen to lossless FLAC audio through VLC, then I still recommend an add-in soundcard, particularly if surround sound is important to you. The onboard positional sound still seems harsh and unnatural compared to what you'd get from an X-Fi Titanium ($150, creative.com), for example.*

If you do opt to install a soundcard, don't forget that it's virtually worthless if you don't pair it up with high-quality speakers (check out the Z-5500 Digital 5.1, $400, logitech.com) or a swank headset (like the Astro A30, $150, astrogaming.com).

Now a luxury rather than an essential component of your gaming PC, a dedicated sound card still runs circles around onboard sound in many ways.

Hard Stuff Trinity

DREAM SYSTEM		MID-RANGE		ENTRY-LEVEL	
CASE AND PSU Cooler Master Cosmos; 850W PSU	$300	**CASE AND PSU** Nzxt Alpha; Gamexstream 700W PSU	$187	**CASE AND PSU** Generic Case; Corsair 450W PSU	$161
PROCESSOR Intel Core i7-950 3.06GHz	$550	**PROCESSOR** Intel Core i7-920 2.66GHz	$256	**PROCESSOR** AMD Athlon X2 6000+ 3.0GHz	$57
MOTHERBOARD Asus P6T Deluxe V2	$262	**MOTHERBOARD** Asus P6T	$244	**MOTHERBOARD** Asus M3A76-CM	$68
MEMORY Corsair 6GB DDR3-1600	$154	**MEMORY** Corsair 6GB DDR3-1333	$178	**MEMORY** Corsair 2GB DDR2-800	$58
OPTICAL DRIVE LG BD370 Blu-ray	$174	**OPTICAL DRIVE** LG GH22NP20	$25	**OPTICAL DRIVE** Sony DDU1681S	$19
HARD DRIVE Intel X25-M 80GB SSD; WD 500GB 7200RPM	$311	**HARD DRIVE** WD 500GB 7200RPM	$50	**HARD DRIVE** WD 250GB 7200RPM	$40
SOUNDCARD Creative Labs X-Fi Titanium	$130	**SOUNDCARD** Onboard	$0	**SOUNDCARD** Onboard	$0
VIDEOCARD Radeon HD5870 (2)	$780	**VIDEOCARD** Radeon HD 5870	$399	**VIDEOCARD** GeForce GT 220	$65
TOTAL PRICE	**$2,661**	**TOTAL PRICE**	**$1,339**	**TOTAL PRICE**	**$468**

EXTREME ALIEN ABUSE!

"He sacrificed my children to complete physics-based puzzles"

HEADCRAB LAMAR'S HOLIDAY HORROR

ALT+ TABLOID

EXTRAORDINARY PC STORIES

$13.37 ISSUE 1

110% TRUE

"INVISIBLE MAN destroyed my house with a CHICKEN"

MY STEROID HELL

MY BULIMIA HELL

MY HELL HELL

STARVING I'm so hungry I have to EAT GHOSTS

SICK BONDAGE SECRETS

"HE TETHERED ME TO A TREE BEFORE LAUNCHING HIS ROCKET"

"My son SUCKED the eyeballs out of a POLICEMAN'S head"

GORDON'S 3-YEAR BINGE: "I have a health kit problem"

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Locked in a DUNGEON and killed DAILY Confessions of a raid boss

KIDNAPPED and forced to perform SICK ACTS for cake

BIOSHOCK

BLUDGEONED TO DEATH BY MY DRUGGED-UP 4 YEAR OLD

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